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*****NOTE FROM TRANSLATION CHICKEN*****

“INTERLUDE II” IS THE SECOND-TO-LAST CHAPTER OF ARC 3, AND SHOULD NARRATIVELY BE RIGHT AFTER THE ENDING OF EPISODE 25 OF THE ANIME.

A LOT OF PEOPLE ASKED ABOUT INTERLUDE I. AFTER RE-READING AGAIN, I THINK THE STORY FLOWS FAR MORE BEAUTIFULLY IF YOU CONTINUE FROM EPISODE 25 DIRECTLY TO INTERLUDE II. INTERLUDE I ONLY SETS UP AND ENDS AT A CLIFFHANGER, AND HAVE LITTLE CONTENT OF ITS OWN. EVERYTHING FROM INTERLUDE I WILL BE ADDRESSED IN INTERLUDE III, SO YOU WON'T MISS ANYTHING.

I'LL TRY MY BEST TO TRANSLATE THE WEB NOVEL TO CONTINUE THE STORY FROM WHERE THE 1ST SEASON LEAVES OFF. THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE WN AND THE ANIME ARE NEGLIGIBLE IN MY OPINION, SO COMING HERE STRAIGHT FROM THE ANIME SHOULDN'T BE A PROBLEM.

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JAPANESE WEB NOVEL SOURCE: [HTTP://NCODE.SYOSETU.COM/N2267BE/164/](http://ncode.syosetu.com/n2267be/164/)

Arc 3 Interlude II [Let's Eat]

In the swaying dragon carriage, Rem was only thinking of him.

His name suddenly appearing in her mind, Rem softly lifted her face, and narrowed her eyes against the bright radiance of the sun.

She gazed at the entourage of dragon carriages ahead, inside them are the wounded soldiers of the battle with the White Whale.

All in all, only their urgent wounds had been treated, and more than a few of them are still seriously injured. Yet even in their pain, the corners of their lips shone only the sense of accomplishment for having fulfilled a long-cherished dream. After carrying this dream for so many years, to see it finally realized meant more to them than injury or death. Having achieved what they set out to do, they now ride toward the Capital, to their triumphant return.

Taking all this into her sight, Rem hated herself for not being able to hold back the pain inside her heart.

[Crusch: You look anxious, Rem. Are you still worrying about him?]

[Rem: ...Crusch-sama]

Glancing toward the voice, it is Crusch sitting beside her.

Wrapped in light bandages, it is commendable how Rem revealed no sign of the seriousness her injuries, but it was impossible to conceal her depleted stamina. The fact that they rode in a carriage was also because Crusch didn't feel comfortable letting Rem ride a ground dragon alone in this condition. So she resolved to accompany her, at least until the Capital is within their sights.

Sensing Rem's unsettled look, Crush casually shrugged.

[Crusch: Compared to this...] shaking her head,

[Crusch: He has Wilhelm, Ferris, the elites of the expedition, and Ricardo's mercenary company, all there to assist him. Besides, Anastasia must have predicted this turn of events. Even if the adversary's strength is a concern, I don't think there is any reason they would lose]

[Rem: Even so, I can't help but selfishly worry]

[Crusch: Still can't remove the source of anxiety huh... When the obstacle is within you, it would be possible to improve yourself until it is overcome. But when it's about other people, it does become quite difficult... Ah, so I am quite terrible at comforting people after all, my apologies]

Seeing Rem sink deeper into her anxiety, Crusch realized she had misspoken and lowered her eyes. But seeing the cold and formal Crusch suddenly out-of-character, the corner of Rem's lips couldn't help but curl into a smile.

[Crusch: En, that's good] seeing this, Crusch nodded contently,

[Crusch: Natsuki Subaru said it before, "a smile suits Rem better, doesn't it?" Even though it sounded like it came out of nowhere, it wasn't an entirely stupid thing to say]

[Rem: Crusch-sama... you know when you smile you give off a completely different impression. You are usually stern, yet once you smile you become...]

[Crusch: People do say that, I can't say I'm not angry about it. Because I don't smile for no reason in front of people, I guess I am becoming rather unlovable...]

Rem wasn't sure whether to take that as a joke, but seeing Crusch's gentle smile, her lips opened into a smile as well. Courageous and proud, to Rem, who has always been lacking confidence, Crusch was an ideal woman. But of course, in Rem's heart, the highest honor was reserved for none other than her older sister, Ram.

[Crusch: Ahead of their path is the Witch Cult... Even though it was more or less expected considering Emilia's identity, until we know more about them, caution is necessary.

Natsuki Subaru realizes this, but surely Lord Mathers has a plan as well?]

[Rem: The depth of my master's mind, Rem couldn't possibly know. Even if you ask me I wouldn't be able to say]

[Crusch: That's harsh. Now that we're allies after all, a little information slipping around wouldn't be too bad]

Perhaps it was to distract Rem from sinking into negative thoughts again, indeed it was thanks to Crusch that Rem wasn't left alone to sink into her worries.

Besides, Crusch made a good point, a man such as Roswaal L. Mathers must have had a grand plan for all this. Surely Subaru's actions were all furthering his master's goals, while at the same time he's recovering his lost reputation.

Actually... with the slaying of the White Whale, his reputation has already far surpassed what it was before.

—“Hero Natsuki Subaru”

To Rem, whose heart and future he had saved, this assessment is nothing short of accurate. Considering the bright future he has yet to create, this is also more than justified.

And then, to be at the side of that radiant hero, a place he could occasionally turn to to make sure she was there, if only that place could hold her existence- then there is nothing else in the world Rem would wish for. With this alone, she would be content.

When Subaru appears in her mind, Rem's heart is always full of turmoil.

It becomes warm, and perhaps calm. Yet somehow it also becomes full of pain, of anxiety, of longing and worry.

To give her heart at once so much happiness and so much suffering, only Subaru could do this to her.

With a smile carved upon her lips, Rem's thoughts turned to her future: her and Subaru's future.

Stealing a glance at the side of Rem's face, Crusch exhaled a sigh of relief. Caressing the scabbard of her knight-sword with her fingers, her eyes stared in silence into the road ahead, her thoughts were of the long path to the Capital.

[Crusch: ——-]

[Rem: ——-?]

Crusch squinted her eyelids, the same instant Rem heard a noise and raised her head.

What Crusch's eyes captured was something off about the dragon carriage up ahead. The noise Rem heard came from the same direction. In fact, both clues were leading to the same conclusion.

In Crusch's eyes, the dragon carriage "disintegrated". In Rem's ears, the prelude to "collapse" echoed like the sound of raindrops.

A mist of blood sprayed out. The image of the dragon carriage in front of them all of a sudden transformed into a pitiful blur.

The ground dragon, the carriage, and all of the wounded inside were completely uprooted, and then shattered mercilessly by overwhelming devastation.

[Crusch: –! Enemy attack!]

Her astonished throat delayed only an instant, before Crusch bellowed out the rally call. With Crusch at the helm, the surrounding dragon carriages sensed the crisis and readied for battle.

Rem, pushing away all sensation of injury and exhaustion, with her morningstar in hand, stood up at once — on the other side of the blood mist was the upright shadow of a man.

Who is that man, now burning into her sight, standing in the middle of the road?

Without weapon, without armor, without fear. Without compassion or malice or intent—!

[Crusch: –Crush over him!!]

Crusch's command came roaring from upon the driver's platform. Hearing the command, the knight-driver stretched the reins in acknowledgement. With a cry, the ground dragon lead the carriage charging — with momentum capable of shredding any large animal coming into contact.

Without deviation from the mark, it was a head-on collision into the upright figure. The man showed no intention of moving. And just like that, the two objects touched, a slender body about to be ripped to shreds by the—

[Rem: Crusch-sama!]

With this cry, Rem picked up Crusch by the waist and flew off the side of the carriage. There was no time to reach for the driver, Rem landed biting her lip, thinking this.

And then, right after,

[Man: Ah really? I want to give up! I didn't even do anything and someone wants to crush me to death. Really, that isn't what people should be doing. I don't think so]

He spoke with the relaxed demeanor of a man leisurely walking in a park, or basking in the sun or some such situation.

If it weren't for the shattered debris of what used to be the dragon carriage, Rem would not have found this scene to be so bizarrely horrifying.

No matter how you look at it, the man doesn't seem anything out of the ordinary.

His body was long and slender, and his neat white hair was neither long nor short, nor particularly odd. His black clothes were neither flamboyant nor shabby, and his face was not eye-catching at all. He looked so very ordinary, that perhaps no matter where you put him he would not seem out of place, that if you met him on the street you'd forget him within 10 seconds.

But the fact is, upon coming into contact with this man, the ground dragon was ripped in two, its feet still in mid-stride, and then, along with the driver and carriage, shattered into countless indiscernible pieces.

The most frightening part is, though Rem never looked away, all she saw was this man merely "standing there".

Not doing anything, just by standing there the man survived collision with a charging dragon carriage, and still stands there as if it were nothing.

[Crusch: Thank you Rem, for saving me. But... it seems the situation hasn't improved]

Still being carried in Rem's arms, Crusch thanked her, stood back up, and in the same instant drew her knight-sword from its sheath. For the knight-driver who followed her order and as a result was shattered into a thousand pieces, Crusch felt the pain in her heart and narrowed her eyelids.

[Crusch: To so cruelly murder my subject, do not think this will end so easily... Who are you?]

With her naked blade gleaming with the intent to kill, she threw these words at the man. Taking in these words, the man touched his chin and began nodding as if he understood.

[Man: Ah I see I see right right, you don't know about me. But I know about you. The whole Capital... actually, the whole country... you are quite the topic of conversation right now. You are a candidate for the next King after all. Even I, so out of touch with the world, can imagine what a great burden...]

[Crusch: Idle talk ends now. Answer my question, or the next time I shall slay you]

[Man: That's really extreme! But then you wouldn't be able to run a country otherwise. Yet this sentiment, I really don't understand it one bit... This desire to wear the crown, and take up all the responsibilities, how can anyone understand it? Ah, ah, even though I don't understand, I won't disagree with you. I'm not so arrogant as that, not one bit. Unlike you...]

Not paying any attention to Crusch, the man just kept on and on.

And then,

[Crusch: –As I said, that was the last chance]

As Crusch coldly pronounced these words, her arm swung out a blade-of-wind.

Crusch's wind-magic combined with swordsmanship, unleashes an invisible slash. Renowned as the "Hundred-Men-Cut", it is a powerful ultra-long-range slash that can sever a man's body without him even knowing where it came from, or who.

Back then, when the Mabeast “Great Rabbit” appeared in the plains of the Karsten county, she slew all the Mabeasts under the Great Rabbit’s command in her first ever battle, and it was that time onward Count Crusch Karsten earned the name “Hundred-Men-Cut”.

Even the White Whale’s adamant skin was opened by this blade, it had played no small part in bringing down that colossal Mabeast. Compared to the White Whale, this small, frail body could not possibly withstand...

Yet,

[Man: ...attacking someone while they’re still talking, just where are your manners?]

Head tilted, as if flaunting how his body took no damage, the man just stood there.

His existence was utterly unaffected by a slash that could rend even the White Whale’s armor. The man’s body — no, even his clothes were unscathed.

He did not defend the attack, rather, it was something wholly different and unknown.

Crusch could not help but hold her breath and Rem froze in place, after witnessing something so far outside the realm of understanding. In front of them, the man sighed for the first time.

[Man: You know...] with a tone lowered by displeasure,

[Man: I was talking. Wasn’t I talking just now? And then you interrupted me. Isn’t that a bit impolite? Don’t you think that was wrong? I have a right to speak... even though I don’t really want to have to point this out, but to not interrupt people when they’re speaking... isn’t that common social decency? You’re free to listen or not listen I won’t bother you about that, but just what are you trying to do by not letting me talk?]

As he ranted, the man occasionally stomped the ground with a displeased expression on his face. And like this, he pointed his finger at those two in front of him, both now eerily speechless.

[Man: And now you're quiet, what is this? You're listening. You were listening, right? Wasn't I asking you something? Then give me some kind of reply, it should be like that, right? You won't even do that, don't even want to. Ah, ah, freedom. That's your freedom. You see me ranting and you want to kill me, then when I ask you a question, you ignore me like I'm the wind. So it's like that, is it? Well you're free to do that. Alright, lets just say it's like that. But then, what is that supposed to mean?]

Seeing the two standing silently in front of him bracing for an attack, he tilted his head and stared at them with his sharp eyes, and then with a smothered voice,

[Man: You're disregarding my Right—one of my only few possessions, right?]

Just as a chill ran up Rem's back, the man took a step forward. His drooping arm lifted, creating a small gust of wind.

Then, on the same line as the motion of his arm — the earth, the air, and the world parted in two.

Round and round and round, Crusch's severed left shoulder flew into the air.

Still grasping onto the sheath of a knight-sword, the arm dropped down in a spray of blood. Crusch, blown off her feet by the impact, fell to the ground, convulsing in pain and mass loss of blood.

[Rem: Crusch-sama—]

Stunned for few seconds, Rem rushed to the side of the fallen Crusch. She placed her hands on Crusch's wound and with the small final remnant of her Mana, applied all her power to stop the bleeding.

Crusch's shoulder flowed bright crimson, the flesh, bones, nerves and arteries were all perfectly severed. A clean and masterful attack, Rem sighed with a rather inappropriate admiration.

[Crusch: Ferris... oh... you?]

Under Rem's healing arms, Crusch looked on with unfocused eyes, muttering indiscernibly, and, with her remaining right arm, grasped tightly onto Rem's knee. Proof that she still possessed the strength to live.

Crusch clenched her teeth, enduring her pain.

Rem kept her eyes on the man's every movement.

She has no means of defending against his strikes. At the first sign of an attack, to leap away with Crusch is the only thing she could do.

In a moment of eerie realization— for some reason Crusch and Rem are all alone — why hasn't anyone come to their aid? In this critical juncture, with their lord gravely wounded, those knights who did not cower even in the face of the White Whale, why—

[Youth: Ah really... I eat and I eat it's still not enough! It's because of that, we keep on living! Eating, chewing, biting, ripping, crunching, munching, sucking! GLUTTONOUS DRINKING! GLUTTONOUS EATING! AH— I'M DONE!]

All of a sudden from behind came the shrill, ear-splitting voice of a teenager.

Like the first man, the youth's voice sent chills running up Rem's spine. Her body stiff, she turned to look at him. The youth stood among several empty carriages, from head to toe he was covered in blood.

His long, dark-brown hair extending all the way down to his knees, his body was short, about the same height as Rem, and perhaps 2 or 3 years younger — perhaps not much older than the kids in the village near the mansion.

Under his hair, only a thin, blood-soaked rag covers his slender body. Every inch of his skin is coated with blood.

Of course none of the blood was his. It was from the knights lying at his feet.

While Crusch and Rem were in a standoff with the man in front, the knights had engaged the enemy behind them. In the end, before Rem even sensed any combat, it was already over.

[Rem: You, are...]

Her voice quivering, Rem, with Crusch in her arms, backed up until both enemies were within her field of vision. Blood from Crusch's shoulder had dyed the road red. Now the air turned cold, as if mocking their weakness, their fear.

Hearing the question, the man and the youth looked at each other.

As if it had all been arranged, they nodded to each other. Then with the same deranged smile of violent delight, they announced their name:

[Man: Witch Cult Sin Archbishop "Greed", Regulus Corneus!]

[Youth: Witch Cult Sin Archbishop "Gluttony", LEY BATENKAITOS!]

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[Ley: When we sensed our pet got killed we came to have a look. But then, AH!— WHAT A DELIGHTFUL HARVEST! It's good, it's pretty good, it's very good, it's great, it's wonderful, it's terrific, it's breathtaking, it's remarkable! It's SPECTACULAR! Passion! Love! Hate! Chivalry! Oh JOY! And SORROW! That is, that is! THAT IS WORTH EATING!]

Witch Cult — and Sin Archbishop.

When those words reached Rem's ears, she stood frozen in place.

With an exhilarated expression the youth stomped on the ground while howling in strange noises.

Spinning, as if dancing, his arms pointed to the fallen knights, and then looked at them as if with overwhelming compassion.

[Ley: How WONDERFUL! To personally come to feed. It's been really hard to find people with backbone nowadays. But now, I am rediscovering my hunger's LONG LOST GRATIFICATION!]

[Regulus: That's what I don't understand about you, Batenkaitos, your hunger isn't real hunger, and the one being filled isn't even you. Why can't you be satisfied with just the way you are? We only truly possess what we hold in our own two hands and can carry with our own two arms. If you realize that, you will be able to control your desires, no?]

[Ley: No need to get preachy old man, I don't like being preached to. I don't disagree with what you said, but I'm not interested either. To be honest, as long as I don't starve – I DON'T REALLY CARE ABOUT THE REST!]

"Gluttony" Batenkaitos descended into a fit of deranged laughter, and "Greed" Regulus shrugged disinterestedly.

Two Sin Archbishops appearing in the same place at the same time, Rem sank into thought.

In terms of strength, defeating these two is impossible.

Even though Crusch's bleeding had been stopped, she is still in critical condition. Whether the knights are dead or comatose, they can no longer fight.

To heal Crusch, Rem had already over-tapped her mana, though if she transform into demon mode she will be able to absorb mana from the atmosphere and put up a fight. But against these two, victory is inconceivable.

On the one hand is the flawless offense and defense of “Greed”. Known to be able to capture a city single handedly, it is impossible to measure the full extent of his power. On the other hand, “Gluttony” is no less formidable. Though his abilities are as yet unknown, he has managed to wipe out an entire battle tested army within seconds. No matter what, Rem could not see victory waiting for her in the near future.

She quickly scanned the battlefield, the Riger carriages are nowhere to be seen. The demihuman mercenaries were tasked with transporting wounded soldiers — and the head of the White Whale. They might have escaped in the chaos and be retreating full speed toward the Capital right now. Commanding them must be the Fang of Iron Vice Captain – Hetaro – bright and resourceful, and possessing great common sense and judgement...

If given enough time, perhaps he will return with reinforcements.

But, even so — it will probably not arrive in time for Rem.

[Rem: White Whale...]

[Regulus: Eh?]

[Ley: Huh?]

She muttered quietly, and both Sin Archbishops tilted their head.

She held her breath for an instant, having found a clue to stall for time. Before they lost interest, she continued.

[Rem: Did you want the Whale back? Because we are transporting the severed head to the Capital right now]

[Ley: Head? Ah, I was beginning to wonder what that weird smell was. What happens to the head doesn't matter anyway. It's dead, sure bring it back, what can you do? If we want to, we could always make a new one... It'll take about the same amount of time to raise]

Saying this, Batenkaitos snapped his neck and ground his teeth,

[Ley: Compared to this...] he said forcefully

[Ley: Compared to a dead Whale we are more interested in the PEOPLE THAT KILLED IT. After 400 years someone FINALLY killed that thing. Even though we were already expecting a feast... AH! THIS IS FAR BEYOND OUR EXPECTATIONS!]

His head shaking up and down, his long hair wildly swinging, the youth laughed with saliva flying from his mouth, clacking his teeth as he did so.

[Ley: "Love! Chivalry! Hatred! Obsession! Accomplishment! Gathered together brought to a boil and swallowed whole! THE GRATIFICATION! Is there anything in the world more DELICIOUS? No no no no no no no no no there isn't there isn't THERE ISN'T! GLUTTONOUS DRINKING! GLUTTONOUS EATING! So! My Heart! My Stomach! My JOY and GRATIFICATION are TREEEEEEEMBLING!!]

Incomprehensible.

As if losing control, Batenkaitos broke into shrill, convulsive laughter. Silently, Rem turned her eyes to Regulus, and Regulus waved hello.

[Regulus: Unfortunately, unlike him... I'm here purely, purely by accident... Not my intention at all... Of course, do I have hunger and desires like his? To hold such selfish, meaningless desires... Unlike his unsatisfied stomach torturing him, I, on the other hand, am completely, utterly, content with myself!]

Spreading his arms wide like a cross, Regulus stood in front of Rem with an utterly refreshing expression.

Crusch's left arm was severed, yet his two arms are still free to bend and turn, it was like an act to flaunt his very existence.

[Regulus: Conflict, I hate that... For me, just merely enjoying the calm and safety of regular life is enough, I have no more need than that. Static, unchanging time and my self, that's the best. Because my hands are small and powerless, for me, just for myself, just to protect my meager possessions I have to use up all my strength. That's my kind of fragile existence]

Regulus emphasized it by clenching his hand into a fist. The hand that claimed countless lives, and the arm of a woman. Such an explanation is just taking it too far.

Be it Ley, a madman in a trance of deranged laughter, or Regulus, a self-righteous, self-satisfied and self-indulged blabbermouth, they certainly are Witch Cultists.

A storm of boiling rage was rising in her heart.

Rem laid Crush, still faintly breathing, down on the grassy plain. She forced her quivering legs to stand. In her hand, she held her morning star, and squeezing out the final drop of her depleted mana, spears of ice formed in the air around her.

Seeing this, Ley and Regulus's expressions changed.

[Regulus: Was anybody listening? I said I don't want to fight? If you're going take an attitude like that, then, then that's ignoring my wishes... That's violating my Right. One of the few meager possessions I was permitted to have... My property. Taken from me. — To me, already so few in my desires, this is... unforgivable!]

[Rem: Enough is enough, Witch Cultist.]

Raising her head toward Regulus, Rem pronounced these words firm and resolute. Toward the disappointed-looking Regulus, Rem rattled her iron chains.

[Rem: Sooner or later, a hero will appear. How much pain and suffering your self-indulgence and conceit had caused in the world, will be known to that hero. Rem's deeply beloved, one and only, hero.]

[Ley: Hey, a hero. We'll be looking forward to that guy! If you believe in him so much, that guy must be DELICIOUS!]

Clapping his hands, body angled forward, Ley Batenkaitos stuck his tongue out at Rem. His eyes were not the eyes of a man looking at an enemy, much less at a woman. They were the eyes of a starving beast looking at his food.

The fallen knights behind Batenkaitos began to blur, and become indistinguishable.

Their existence, their position, none of it is now comprehensible to Rem. Why are they lying there, who are they, and what relation do they have to herself?

Just like the nightmare of one's existence being erased by the White Whale's mist. So the Whale's master, "Gluttony", possessed the same Authority.

—"Head Maid of the Household of Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers, Rem"

Intending to proclaiming her identity, Rem shook her head.

In this moment, the name she really wanted to say was

[Rem: Right now, I am only someone who is beloved by the person she loves. Companion of the Hero, the one I love the most in all the world, no matter what. Natsuki Subaru's companion, Rem]

A pristine white horn emerged from her forehead, an immense surge of mana flew into her body from the atmosphere.

Her body drinking in new strength, the chain of her morning star writhing, rattling, the ice spears around her ringing in anticipation.

She opened her eyes, taking in the world and the feeling of the atmosphere. In her mind, she was seeing his face.

[Rem: Prepare yourselves, Sin Archbishops. Rem's hero shall bring punishment upon you!]

Raising her morning star, the same instant the ice spears flew, Rem's body shot forth.

As if in reply, Batenkaitos' mouth stretched wide open, full of fangs.

[Ley: How wonderful!! —Ah such PASSION! LET'S EAT!!]

Clash met clash, and in that instant she thought—

I wish when he realizes I am gone, it could cause a small ripple in his heart.

—This alone, was what Rem wished for in her final moment.

Arc 3 Interlude III [To Each, Their Oaths]

—Lying on the bed, her expression was serene. To Subaru she looked like she was sleeping.

Her lashes are so long... he thought in a daze, gazing at her closed eyes. She'd usually make an effort to keep her face expressionless, but in her sleep, a softness befitting her age was showing on her cheeks. Come to think of it, Subaru had never seen her asleep.

She always woke before him, and slept after he did. Subaru knew, to keep herself resolute, she had always tried to bury the childish side of her, but that stubborn facade had collapsed so many times before Subaru's eyes.

Be it surprised, or embarrassed, pouting or about to cry, or after opening their hearts her smile gleaming under her tears, there should be so many, so many chances to see them again—

[—Rem]

Even calling her name, caressing her soft, white cheeks, she made no response.

On the bed, deep in her slumber, the maid's dress so familiar on her shoulders, the white headband that adorned her hair so blue and beautiful as the sky, were all gone.

The attire she wore in her work, and in battle — she had no need for them now.

[There you are]

In the room silent and stagnant as though time had stopped, someone called to Subaru.

Slowly turning, as though reluctantly, he looked behind him. It was a young woman with long, softly swaying hair. She wore a simple yet elegant dark blue evening dress, and even as she walked toward him, she seemed overflowing with grace.

But all her movements had a slightly muddled hesitation about them, which combined with the elegance of her person gave out a rather odd impression. Subaru cannot help but feel a sense of awkwardness when he is near her.

[Long Haired Girl: She...]

[Subaru: Still hasn't changed. Even though I can't do anything... I thought I could at least stay here with her. But that's such a cowardly thing to say]

[Long Haired Girl: Still, this... would make her happy, wouldn't it?]

Seeing Subaru's downcast expression, the woman timidly tried to console him. But hearing this, Subaru shot back a stare at once fierce, bitter, and cruel. His senses sharpened at her words, his eyes locked onto hers. Without meaning to, it was already far beyond his control. Noticing his reaction, the young woman placed her hands over her lips, [I'm sorry], she apologized.

[Long Haired Girl: I said something I shouldn't have, and hurt you, didn't I?]

[Subaru: No... no, I am the one who should apologize. I was only venting my anger all pent up inside... If I behave like this, Rem will be really, really angry with me, won't she? "You shouldn't be hurting people's feelings like that, Subaru-kun", or something like that]

He shrugged, and said that softly in Rem's voice.

In his mind, he heard her voice saying those words. A voice only he could hear.

His impression sounded nothing like her, but there is not a person left in the world who could point that out.

Against Subaru's empty words and gestures, the woman sadly lowered her eyes, and held her left wrist with her right hand.

As if a shadow had descended between them, the room returned to silence.

...This familiar feeling... Natsuki Subaru shouldn't stay like this, should he? Subaru shook his head in his heart.

To sink into the depths of an ocean of despair, is easy, even if only so the piercing anguish would go away. But it doesn't suit him – as the man she believes in, as the man Rem loves above all the world, this is not what Natsuki Subaru should do.

Never.

[Subaru: ...You were looking for me, then?]

[Long Haired Girl: Yes, I want to hold a meeting with everyone present, so I've asked everyone to gather in the lounge, if it's alright with...]

Nodding with an expression like she's just been saved, the woman got right to the point. But then she stopped half way through, and furrowed her brows rather awkwardly. It took a while before Subaru noticed this.

[Subaru: My name is Natsuki Subaru]

[Long Haired Girl: ...I'm sorry, Natsuki Subaru-sama. I will be sure to remember. Even though I've been told how much I am indebted to you... Please excuse me, my apologies!]

[Subaru: It can't be helped, can it? There must a lot of things you need to remember right now, don't worry about it.]

As if to say she was very, very sorry, the young woman lowered her head.

Then, seeing her recover again with perfect grace, even femininity, Subaru cannot help but feel a sense of surreal incongruity stabbing at his chest. But even Subaru wasn't brash enough to say this out loud.

Shaking his head, Subaru decided to put that aside for now, and stood up.

Turning to the girl on the bed, he gently touched the hair on her forehead.

[Subaru: I'll be back, Rem]

Breathing softly, she really exists.

—Having been forgotten by all the world, this was her only remaining existence.

With Rem behind his back, Subaru turned to face the young woman.

[Subaru: The lounge is it? Let's not make them wait, let's go]

[Long Haired Girl: Yes, let's go, Natsuki Subaru-sama]

Her head slightly inclining forward, softly smiling, she seemed at that moment like something out of a dream – her long, green hair, flowing with her every movement.

Hating having to admit this, Subaru turned away, hiding a genuine smile emerging on his face.

[Subaru: Thank you for coming to fetch me, Miss Crusch]

With this name, Subaru thanked the long haired girl – who seem to have become a different person entirely.

—By the time Subaru arrived in the Capital, it was already over.

His conversation with Emilia on the road were all gone from his mind.

The girl sitting safely next to him, Subaru should feel content, and relieved, having finally, finally saved her. But in the relentlessly galloping dragon carriage, the only thing on Subaru's mind was the other girl.

[Who is... Rem?]

Looking confused, she tilted her head as she said this.

He scrambled to look for the smallest hint of a joke, something in her voice, in her expression, hoping against hope the words “Just kidding~” would come out of her mouth...

Whether it's Petra, or the other kids, no one remembered her.

Having confirmed this fact with everyone on the carriage, Subaru commanded the driver to rush to the Capital with all haste, on his face was the desperate expression of someone riding into death itself.

Impossible. There must be a mistake.

It was all going so well. Everyone was saved, the objective was completed. Despite enduring so much pain and sorrow, taking so many scars within his heart that will never, ever heal, everything worked out in the end.

And still—

[Aha! It's Subaru-kyun! Impressive, Crusch-sama, you managed to find that capricious little stray!]

On the way to the lounge, seeing the two in the hallway, someone called out to them.

Shaking around in a short dress, liberated from the knight's garments, a pair of catlike ears twitched. Ferris walked over to them and gently picked up Crusch's hands.

[Crusch: Ferris-san...]

[Ferris: I'm just Ferris! Ferris and Crusch-sama have known each other for a very long time nyan. If you still add a -san to my name I'm going to die of loneliness and despair nyan]

Holding up Crusch's hands in one hand, Ferris used the other to nudge Crusch in the shoulder. At such affectionate interaction, Crusch looked like she wasn't sure what to do with herself, but essentially accepted it as it is, and with a [Sorry], she lowered her head.

[Crusch: To become just like before... Even though it's not easy, I will try my best, Ferris... Yes. Just Ferris]

[Ferris: It's alright nyan, because Ferris is always Crusch-sama's companion, and will always stay by your side. And to be together with such a cute version of Crusch-sama, Ferris will find even more reasons to fall for Crusch-sama nyan, just the thought of that makes Ferris happy nyan!]

Playfully swinging Crusch's captured hands up and down, Ferris blew her a kiss.

Watching them, the unease growing inside Subaru's heart became unbearable.

Even though Crusch had changed so drastically, Ferris treated her the same as always, and accepted her as always, it was something beyond what Subaru could understand.

Inside that smile of Ferris', how much inner struggle must be lying within? Subaru doesn't know, nonetheless, the thought of it alone filled him with sentiment.

[Ferris: Subaru-kyun, get in the lounge nyan. Emilia-sama and old man Wilhelm are waiting for us]

[Subaru: ...A..ah]

His thoughts must have added something into his voice, but Ferris didn't seem to notice. Saying [This way, Crusch-sama], Ferris led her by the hand.

In the subtle atmosphere between Subaru and Ferris, Crusch tried to hide the uncertainty looming between her brows. She looked at them, one and then the other, and in the end not saying a thing, silently followed behind Ferris' steps.

Taking a deep breath, Subaru bit his lips, and closed his eyes.

His mind was on edge. His heart felt desolate. In that state he didn't want to see anyone at all. But it can't be helped. He will not make excuses to comfort himself.

Because the last thing he'd want to do, is to blame her for his pain.

This way, they made their long-overdue entry into the lounge.

Noticing all eyes were on him, Subaru looked around the room. Other than himself, there were four people present, Emilia, Wilhelm, and one step before him, Crusch and Ferris.

Seeing he must be the last one, Subaru closed the door behind him, and ever-so-naturally sat down next to Emilia.

[Emilia: Subaru...]

[Subaru: No-problem. I've calmed down now, Emilia-tan — I, am, alright]

To Emilia's worried call, Subaru lightheartedly retorted. Only his eyes weren't looking at her. Rather, he couldn't see her at all.

If he met Emilia's eyes now, he would have revealed a despised part of himself. The very thought of it filled him with uncontrollable dread.

[Ferris: Now that everyone is here, let's begin!]

With the sound of a clap, everyone's attention landed on Ferris.

It would be impossible for Crusch to direct a meeting in her condition, so that task fell to Ferris.

Roughly surveying everyone present, Ferris walked to the front of the room with an arm in the air.

[Ferris: Since there are no objections nyan, let's assess our situation]

Thus, with a smile, a meeting from which everyone wanted something completely different, began.

—After the battle with the White Whale, on their way back to the Capital, Rem, Crusch, and the punitive expedition, bringing with them wounded soldiers and the Whale's severed head, were ambushed by two Sin Archbishops.

Half of the expedition perished. The demihuman mercenaries accompanying them retreated immediately, and avoided annihilation.

[Ferris: When the Vice-Captain Hetaro brought the Capital's knights back to the scene, the Sin Archbishops were already gone nyan. Only our knights' bodies and...]

[Crusch: People who were like me... right?]

Crusch furrowed her brows at Ferris' last few words, biting her lip. With a dejected expression, she must have felt it was all her fault.

To her, the "Crusch" in Ferris' story might as well be referring to another person.

Because—

[Crusch: My memory was erased... By a Sin Archbishop?]

[Ferris: Probably nyan. I've attended to the other patients with the same condition as Crusch-sama. Their memories are completely gone, there is nothing Ferris' healing magic can do nyan. Even now Ferris has no idea what the cause is...]

[Wilhelm: Sin Archbishop, "Gluttony". This Authority- it must be him]

Wilhelm nodded gravely, and with a stern gaze he looked to Crusch. But, seeing Crusch shrivel under his gaze, Wilhelm closed his eyes in apology.

[Wilhelm: I was inconsiderate of Crusch-sama's condition, and frightened you. I am deeply sorry. I still have much to learn]

[Crusch: No... I should apologize for being such a useless master... Even though I am trying my hardest to remember everything about Wilhelm-sama...]

Hearing Crusch call him "Wilhelm-sama", the old swordsman cringed.

Seeing his sworn master suffering so, the guilt and shame of having failed to protect her brought pain onto Wilhelm's face. Glancing toward Subaru, who at this moment must be carrying the very same feeling in his heart, Wilhelm seemed to understand him.

On the other hand, Ferris, whose attitude toward Crusch would not waver in spite of everything... seemed to disregard Subaru's feeling completely.

[Ferris: Sin Archbishop "Sloth" has been dealt with. And nyan there's "Gluttony" and "Greed". There is a limit to what can be done nyan. Something so rare as two Sin Archbishops moving together, I'd be surprised if Emilia-sama's rise has nothing to do with it]

[Emilia:me?]

Her name suddenly mentioned, Emilia looked at Ferris with a surprised expression. Nodding to her, Ferris continued.

[Ferris: The Witch's Cult will never tolerate the existence of a half-elf such as Emilia-sama. They are usually quiet and creep in the shadows, but now they're all suddenly making such a ruckus, there is obviously a connection here.]

Listening to Ferris' speculations, Subaru crossed his arms, and pondered on a conversation they had before.

The night before the battle with the White Whale, when Subaru discussed with Ferris and Crusch the possibility of a Witch Cultist attack, they had accepted his suspicions readily. That means there must have been precedents...

[Emilia: But um... Even though I don't know much about the Witch Cult... The Witch refers to the "Witch of Envy", right?]

Raising her hand nervously, Emilia uttered this entirely unexpected question.

Subaru doubted his hearing, Wilhelm and Ferris' expressions froze. The only people who weren't astonished by those words were Crusch, and Emilia herself.

Seeing their reactions, Emilia became even more nervous.

[Emilia: Sorry! I can tell from your reactions that that's something I should know, really, really, should]

[Subaru: But... Emilia-tan... you know about the Witch, you were the one who told me...]

The first time they met, she had given him the name "Satella", and then after he had died, he tried to call her by that name again. His memory of her anger... meant that she knew that name was forbidden.

But Emilia shook her head at Subaru's words,

[Emilia: Near the forest where I lived there was a small village... they hated me because of my likeness to the Witch of Envy... So I know how the Witch is regarded in the world, but things like the Witch Cult...]

[Ferris: How Emilia-sama lived in the past let's just put that aside for nyan! But to say that you don't even know about the Witch Cult at this point is just too outrageous nyan!!]

Shoulders raised, as if mocking, Ferris' hands flung up with a sigh.

Seeing this attitude from Ferris, Subaru's anger rose, and staring into Ferris' eyes he retorted.

[Subaru: How can you say this? To admit you don't know something, do you realize how much courage that takes? To ask what is necessary, what is wrong with that?]

[Ferris: Subaru-kyun is really persuasive nyan! You really are master and servant nyan!]

Ferris relentlessly mocking Subaru's unhidden displeasure, Subaru was about to stand up in anger— But,

[Crusch: Ferris. I cannot overlook what you just said. Apologize at once.]

The moment before Subaru's strength injected into his legs, the words of reproach rang out in the room.

In her dark blue evening dress, up to now frail and timid, she all of a sudden transformed — majestic and fierce, her gaze was that of a Knight.

[Crusch: As Natsuki Subaru-sama said, to ask what you do not know, is nothing deserving of mockery. Even you do not have that right. Understood?]

[Ferris: ...Understood, Crusch-sama]

Her forceful words subsiding, Crusch seemed to return to the soft-spoken girl of a moment before. But as if having heard something from the awe-inspiring Crusch of the past, from this now frail and feminine girl, Subaru could not hold in his astonishment. Ferris too, could not contain the shock within his eyes.

[Ferris: Emilia-sama, please accept my apology for my rudeness. Subaru-kyun too]

[Subaru: You... n... no, it's fine. Then, let's talk about the Witch Cult now. Emilia-tan wants to hear it. And to be honest, I don't know the details either...]

Seeing Subaru back down, half giving up, Ferris lightheartedly replied with a [Understood-nyan]. A finger lightly touching the lower lip, Ferris shook around in the short dress.

[Ferris: Firstly, as Emilia-sama said, the Witch Cult is an organization that worships the “Witch of Envy”. Ever since the unstoppable rise of the Witch 400 years ago, these fanatics have been active. To the Knights Order, all affiliates of this organization are to be killed-on-sight]

[Emilia: Killed-on-sight... to carry out such extreme orders, how could they?]

[Ferris: The Witch Cultists will not hesitate to burn a village or an entire city just to accomplish their goals. In fact, the village near Lord Roswaal’s mansion came close to falling victim to these Cultists, and one of the Sin Archbishops that took part in the ambush had once managed to single handedly capture a city in the Empire of Volakia in the South]

Emilia kept on blinking her eyes, as if unable to take in these facts. Subaru understands her reaction, because the horrors of the Witch Cult had already been carved deep into his heart.

He now uses Betelgeuse as the standard unit of measurement for insanity.

But in terms of strength, “Greed” sounds like something on a completely different level than Betelgeuse.

[Ferris: Wait wait I’m getting sidetracked nyan... The Witch Cult Sin Archbishops, each named after one of the six Sins, other than Envy, are the executives of the organization]

[Emilia: The six witches... were “Sloth”, “Greed”, “Gluttony”, “Lust”, “Wrath” and “Pride”, right?]

[Ferris: Yes, and especially well known among them are “Sloth” and “Greed”. Greed, as previously mentioned, is known for annihilating entire cities. Sloth, on the other hand, seemed to be behind every little disturbance caused by the Witch Cult. But Sloth has

already been beautifully eliminated by our punitive expedition nyan... Right, Subaru-kyun?]

[Subaru: Yes... Sloth is dead. I saw him disintegrate with my own eyes, there is no mistaking it]

Subaru confirmed Ferris' words, his mind playing back the final moments of the abominable Betelgeuse.

Screaming Subaru's name, full of hatred... Even long afterward, the sound would not leave his ears. Like a curse, it kept on howling...

—Was that the reason behind Subaru's cruel fate?

[Ferris: There are now 5 remaining Sin Archbishops. Two of them were responsible for the ambush on Crusch-sama. Their movements are always mysterious, and so even after 400 years the efforts to eradicate them barely made any progress. As to their objective... It is said that they want to revive the Witch of Envy]

[Subaru: Revive... the Witch?]

Unable to disregard these words, Subaru jumped up, tipping over his chair.

Noticing this gave the girls a fright, Subaru waved his hands up and down.

[Subaru: To revive her... is that even possible? The Witch has been dead for 400 years right? To make something like that come back to life...]

[Wilhelm: Subaru-dono, the Witch of Envy is not dead. Her life is still linked to the edge of this world. Unfortunately]

To the agitated Subaru, Wilhelm quietly revealed this fact.

Speechless, Subaru looked to Wilhelm, and met his eyes, serious and severe.

[Wilhelm: Near the Great Fall, there is a Sealing-Stone Temple. The Witch is there, her indestructible existence sealed inside. For even with the power of the Dragon and the Sword Saint combined, she cannot be destroyed]

[Subaru: Sealed... I might have heard that before... but to revive her, why don't they just destroy the seal?]

Where did Subaru hear that before? But more importantly is the question...

...If the witch was sealed, they merely need to break the seal, but instead, every time a half-elf appears they wreck havoc in the world with senseless murder and destruction. Just what is the Witch Cult trying to do? But at this question, Wilhelm shook his head.

[Wilhelm: To approach the temple is almost impossible. First, there is very little mana near the Great Fall, under those circumstances, no one can withstand the Witch's scent. Secondly, they cannot bypass the Elder Sages]

[Subaru: Elder Sages...?]

[Ferris: The Elder Sage Shaula, and the First Generation Sword Saint, and the Dragon Borukanica, were the heroes who sealed the Witch of Envy nyan. Then they retired to the Pleiades Watchtower near the Great Fall. But retired in name only, even now, they keep their watch, for those who would revive the Witch. —That is, as the story goes]

[Subaru: They must be... quite old...]

Four hundred years is quite a long breath, even for Sages.

But that is besides the point. Subaru decided to set that aside so Ferris could continue.

[Subaru: Well now we know why the Witch can't be unsealed, but then how do they revive her?]

[Ferris: Even if you ask nyan, Ferris isn't a Witch Cultist and doesn't know either. All we can do is torture a Witch Cultist and have them spit it out nyan]

Brushing off Subaru's question, Ferris took on an "I give up" expression.

Even though Subaru wasn't satisfied, there was no point pursuing the question further.

In any case, Emilia nodded.

[Emilia: So that's... why I'm treated like this... But why didn't Puck...]

[Subaru: Did Puck say something just now? There is a mountain of things I need to ask him!]

[Emilia: Puck didn't respond... Even though he seems to have materialized... I only know he's near by...]

Seeing Emilia shriveling in her seat, it did not even occur to Subaru to say "there, there". In fact, to talk to Puck is something he absolutely must do.

Besides, there is no way to predict where or when Sin Archbishop "Greed" will appear. Puck's input will also be crucial.

[Ferris: That's all there is to say about the Witch Cult nyan. So on top of that, let's move the discussion to the future]

[Subaru: The future...?]

Turning to Subaru with a clap, Ferris, with a jubilant smile, said

[Ferris: To put it simply, this Alliance... let's dissolve it nyan]

The atmosphere in the lounge froze. Only Subaru's mind was heating up.

Taking in those words, he pondered a moment, quietly licking his lips.

[Subaru: Dissolve the Alliance? What are you trying to say?]

[Ferris: Exactly what it sounds like nyan. As things are right now, our Alliance will not be mutually beneficial nyan]

Perhaps because Subaru kept his composure, Ferris' expression revealed a touch of admiration.

Rather annoyed by Ferris' expression, Subaru wondered if Ferris was setting up the Alliance as a bargaining chip to gain an advantage in the negotiation. The more he thought, the more he commanded himself to keep calm. But even so, his head was nearly boiling.

[Subaru: Mining rights aside, we coordinated our efforts to defeat the White Whale, and after everything is done, now you want to back out after reaping the benefits? That's a bit scandalous no matter how you look at it]

[Ferris: More detriment than benefits, Subaru-kyun]

[Subaru: Ah?]

Compared to Subaru's aggressive attitude, Ferris went on casually, wagging a finger.

[Ferris: Nyan? "Gluttony" and "Greed" appearing together, for starters. After killing "Sloth", an Alliance with Emilia-sama's camp will only make us targeted by the Witch Cult... Considering what happened to Crusch-sama... do you still believe it's in our interest to form an Alliance right now?]

[Subaru: That is...]

Glancing toward the completely different Crusch, Subaru hesitated to counter Ferris' argument. Because deep in his heart, he was carrying the same wounds.

This time, it wasn't Subaru who refuted Ferris' words.

[Wilhelm: I disagree, Ferris]

Leaning forward in his seat, Wilhelm's stern gaze stared into Ferris' eyes. Ferris, eyelids narrowed, let out an [Eh-?] with a thin smile.

[Ferris: What do you mean nyan? After what Gluttony did to Crusch-sama, what do you think is the benefit of an Alliance that will draw the Witch Cult to us?]

[Wilhelm: To kill "Gluttony"... An opportunity to avenge our master]

[Ferris: Vengeance? Is that more important to you than Crusch-sama's life!?!]

Against Wilhelm, Ferris refused to give ground.

Weighing heavily on both their minds, were thoughts of their master.

[Ferris: If we continue to deal with the Witch Cult this disaster will only repeat again! Crusch-sama right now can't even protect herself! When that day comes... If it's physical wound or emotional wound, Ferris can heal you... But if you die it's all over isn't it!?!]

[Wilhelm: But we cannot remain idle while the offender roams free. Crusch-sama's memories, when we defeat the Sin Archbishop, there is a chance they will return. To give up this early, is far too rash]

[Ferris: Defeating that bastard will bring the memories back? I say, Wilhelm, to think lost memories can be brought back by killing the thing that ate it... are you daydreaming or do you think this is some kind of fairy tale w—]

[Wilhelm: —Felix!!]

With an ear-splitting roar, the swordsman's aura resounded in the room. As if a gust of wind had swept in – was the sensation felt by everyone present.

All wincing from the shock, only Wilhelm's keen gaze remained intact.

[Wilhelm: Felix... What you said just now. Never utter it again in front of Subaru-dono]

[Ferris:I'm sorry]

...Called by his true name, twice, Ferris closed his eyes with grief and remorse.

The others turned their eyes to Subaru, who was already sitting once more. His hands clenched tightly, faintly trembling, blood seeped through the gaps between his fingers, as if about to cover them whole.

[Subaru:Emilia-tan]

[Emilia: Don't worry..... I won't say anything like "I understand" or "it's alright"... Even though I want to understand how you feel... that forgotten child... because I don't understand anything, no matter what I say, it won't be fair to you...]

Subaru looked up, into Emilia's violet pupils that flickered with sadness.

In her eyes he saw a reflection of himself, in all his weakness... is that the Natsuki Subaru she sees?

...As if saved by that tender regard, Subaru shook his head.

[Subaru: To say something like "it's alright"... even if I rip my mouth apart right now I won't be able say it. But I am fine. Ferris, don't worry about it. I... will not give up, as long as there is the tiniest fragment of hope left]

[Ferris: Really nyan... Subaru-kyun sure doesn't like to give up...]

Watching Subaru trying to act like he was fine, Ferris' countenance broke down into a smile. But his position remained unchanged.

[Ferris: As for Ferris nyan, I don't agree that we should continue the Alliance. I will return Crusch-sama to herself, just watch. So something like vengeance against "Gluttony" we should just set that aside for nyan]

[Wilhelm: What we should do, and how... Crusch-sama, you must decide. It is not in our position to do it]

In the end, it all falls on her.

Both their eyes focused upon her, and Crusch, as if understanding, nodded.

[Crusch: There is still plenty that I do not know. And what I was before, I cannot remember. I want to tell you now, that it will be disorienting, being around me... But even so, I thank you for placing in me your esteem, and trust. And if I could, I want to live up to that expectation. For that, I shall try my best]

Despite losing her memory, it seemed her strength of character remained.

Just what is the core essence of a person? Seeing Crusch like this once more, even after forgetting everything she knew, Subaru could not help but ask himself that question.

But as to the Alliance, there is no better choice than to put the negotiations on hold for now.

[Ferris: In any case, if the one who holds all the key information concerning Emilia-sama's faction... Margrave Roswaal isn't present, then there is nothing we can do nyan. So for our next negotiation, let's hold it on the condition that the Margrave be in attendance]

[Crusch: Yes, that is for the best. Then this meeting...]

[Ferris: Will be a secret — So pretend it was about something other than an Alliance nyan]

Ferris shot a sharp glance at Subaru, saying this in an unusually low voice.

Subaru swallowed, but seeing no reason to disagree, he nodded. From their perspective, this decision made sense. If Crusch's current condition is known to the public, her status as the most competent candidate will vanish.

In fact, the repercussions of Crusch's amnesia becoming public knowledge is of the same magnitude as the prestige of slaying the White Whale. It is for precisely this reason that Anastasia wasn't invited to this meeting.

[Ferris: Regardless of Julius, Anastasia will certainly use this information to her advantage. Good thing Crusch-sama's condition hasn't been seen by those kids of hers]

[Crusch:She will be present at the victor's negotiations, what do we do about that?]

[Ferris: We can make an excuse and say you're unwell. Ferris will think of something. As for Subaru-kyun, your side just need to keep this secret, understood?]

Requesting only silence, Ferris would not allow any further entanglement between their two factions. Subaru, noticing this, only nodded.

In the end, the meeting concluded without any progress whatsoever.

Acknowledging the desperation of their situations, more than anything else, the two factions are aligned in the uncertainty of their futures.

[Subaru: Thank you for back there, Wilhelm-san]

After the meeting in the lounge, Subaru called out to Wilhelm outside the Karsten Mansion. Stopping in his steps, Wilhelm turned to Subaru.

[Wilhelm: Not at all. I was of no help, I'm ashamed of how deficient I am. Above all, I was unable to assist you today]

[Subaru: Don't say that, without Wilhelm-san, we wouldn't have defeated the White Whale. And afterward I was able to entrust Emilia and the villagers to you. I am really really grateful!]

These were unpackaged, genuine words of gratitude. But, even this could not lift the gloom from Wilhelm's face.

Never forgetting a past kindness, always carrying the pain of others within himself. This man... isn't he too good-natured for his own good? Subaru smiled at the thought.

[Subaru: Even though the situation hasn't settled yet, have you had a chance to visit your wife's grave? Even though it's no consolation, but at least you avenged...]

[Wilhelm: —!]

At Subaru's words, Wilhelm's face suddenly collapsed with deep emotion.

Seeing those intertwined waves of grief and sentiment, Subaru didn't know what to do. Noticing Subaru's hesitation, Wilhelm bowed deeply.

[Wilhelm: Subaru-dono, I must apologize!]

[Subaru: Wait, don't be like this, you have nothing to be sorry about, I should be thanking you right now...]

[Wilhelm: No, that is not true. The words I spoke in the meeting were not out of genuine desire to be your ally. It was my vain, selfish sentiment that made me support the Alliance. For concealing my guilt, I am deeply ashamed]

Not understanding Wilhelm's words, Subaru furrowed his brows.

Seeing this, Wilhelm took off his overcoat, and rolled up his left sleeve – revealing a bandaged wound around his left shoulder. Through the outer cloth one could see that the inner layers are wet with blood.

[Subaru: Does it hurt? You should get Ferris to look at that]

[Wilhelm: This wound cannot be healed. It was dealt by an opponent who possessed the Divine Protection of “Death God”]

[Subaru: Can’t be healed? ...Then, Wilhelm-san!]

What an unhealable wound leads to, even Subaru knows this.

Normally, if bleeding can’t be stopped, it’s like a timer being set on one’s life. But unlike Subaru, who looked full of apprehension, Wilhelm shook his head calmly.

[Wilhelm: My life is not in danger right now]

[Subaru: How can that be? That wound... what kind of attack...]

[Wilhelm: I did not receive this wound today or yesterday. It was from a long time ago, and it recently re-opened. But, for me right now, the wound is too large]

Listening to Wilhelm’s quiet words, Subaru’s small body quivered and contracted. Not knowing why he is having this reaction, even the roots of his teeth felt like they didn’t fit in his jaw. All this came from the “Sword Demon” in front of him, an incredible aura that could freeze ones liver solid.

Continuing in his calm, gentle voice

[Wilhelm: The effects of a Divine Protection becomes stronger, when the owner of the Divine Protection is near. When “Death God”’s owner approaches, the wounds they inflicted will open]

[Subaru: Then that means... the person who inflicted your wound long ago... is near...]

[Wilhelm: The one who wounded my left shoulder... Is the Previous-Generation Sword Saint]

Listening to Wilhelm, Subaru's breathing stopped.

Gazing into Wilhelm's eyes, he saw the frozen glitters of emotion.

[Wilhelm: Thearesia van Astrea. The wound dealt by my wife has re-opened. In order to find out why, I must continue to pursue the Witch Cult...]

Lost in a daze, Subaru stepped into the room where Rem was sleeping.

Ever since returning to Crusch's mansion, whenever there is a chance, he would come to stay with her.

Even though he knew it would not happen, somewhere in his heart, in his weakness, he hoped she could just wake up.

In this state, he no longer had the courage or the will to face Emilia. Being Emilia, perhaps she would understand after all. If she was by his side now, it will only bring her pain. Unless Subaru looked for her, she would give him time to himself, even though she couldn't stop worrying.

If Emilia was here, he'd probably cry, if only to comfort that weakness within his heart.

Though he hated that weakness, he could not cut it from himself.

[Rem... Even though you told me I'm strong, I... without you with me, I can't find it Rem... I can't...]

Nothing changed from when he left for the lounge.

Softly breathing. Her heart was beating. But other than this, there was not a single sign of life. Right now, only Subaru's heart still carries her existence.

But,

[Subaru: — It's you... which wind blew you here?]

[Puck: Me being here, is that so strange? Even I had some kind of relationship with this girl before, right? Then occasionally coming here, what's wrong with that?]

[Subaru: Where do you get the nerve...]

Gently touching Rem's sleeping forehead, Subaru glanced to his side — Floating in the air, was a small grey cat wagging his long tail, looking at him.

At the meeting he was nowhere to be found, yet he showed up here. Noticing Subaru's severe glance, Puck seemed taken aback.

[Puck: Why're you looking at me like that? Did I do something?]

[Subaru: ...Right now, you didn't do anything... Go find Emilia, as long as you go float around somewhere else]

[Puck: Is that so? That's a curious thing to say. Even though my freedom isn't restricted, if that child gets in trouble while I'm not there...]

Flicking his whisker, Puck murmured leisurely. Then, floating up to Subaru's face,

[Puck: But I think its better that I talk to Subaru right now]

[Subaru: ...Acting like you know everything, it's really pissing me off]

Subaru turned his gaze away. Even so, Puck silently waited for him.

Subaru sighed, even though meekly following along annoyed him.

[Subaru: You didn't tell Emilia about the Witch Cult... What are your intentions?]

[Puck: No intention at all, if some things you can live without knowing, then not knowing is fine too. If Lia asked me, I would have told her, but she didn't ask... People like that, if you just avoid them then it doesn't matter, right?]

[Subaru: Yes, there are times when it's fine to not know some things. But this is totally not the case for Emilia is it?? That girl came out of the forest, to become King, she is fighting to win the Royal Selection! There is no way to avoid the Witch Cult like that. —You know this, of course you know this]

Pressing low his voice, Subaru pursued Puck's intentions. But Puck, wobbling in the air, easily dodged Subaru's vigorous questions.

[Puck: The Witch Cult appearing... I suspected it too. But whether I would convey that to Lia is a completely different matter]

[Subaru: Even if it meant endangering her, and everyone else around her!? I don't know what you're thinking, but if things went the way they were Emilia would have —!!]

[Puck: I see... You did all this to save Lia. This child too... she sacrificed herself to help her. In that case I really need to thank this child...]

[Subaru: —!]

In that instant, disregarding all the world, Subaru threw his punch.

At the Spirit in front of his eyes, without a trace of hesitation, he swung with all his might. The Spirit, easily avoiding his strike, washed its face with astonishment.

[Puck: What are you doing, all of a sudden?]

[Subaru: Don't you dare touch Rem. Not with your hands, or your words...]

Surprised himself, his voice broke quietly.

The emotions brewing in his heart, perhaps they became too impossible to bear.

With his round eyes, Puck gazed deep into Subaru, and with an [I understand], he stretched his little body.

[Puck: I said something inconsiderate, sorry, I shouldn't have said it. Instead of this... Let's talk a bit about "Gluttony"]

[Subaru: ...talk? What will that do now?]

[Puck: If you learn the nature of the thing that ate this girl's "Name" and "Memory", perhaps there is hope of fulfilling your wish, after all]

Jumping at those words, Subaru's face flung up. Seeing this reaction, Puck nodded, then he turned up his small pink nose as if searching for a memory.

[Puck: "Gluttony"'s Authority, to put it simply, is eating. When he eats a person's "Name", all memories about this person is taken, and when he eats a person's "Memory", that person's own memories are taken. If both are taken, then the person becomes an empty shell. An empty shell won't do anything, and could not do anything. This girl's condition, is just that]

[Subaru: "Name"... "Memory"...]

Crusch's memory. Rem's memory and name.

Such is the effect of Gluttony's Authority.

[Subaru: After killing the Sin Archbishop "Gluttony"... will the memories return...?]

[Puck: Ah, what would happen? Throw up everything that's been eaten... even though I don't like to think about it, is that something that can be done? You'll need to ask the man himself...]

[Subaru: But the possibility exists, doesn't it!? Rem's memories, the possibility of retrieving Rem's memories....!]

Turning back... Rem is still deep in her slumber.

Still softly breathing. Her heart was beating. Her body is still alive, only her memory, and her name, were eaten by a fiend.

[Subaru: Sin Archbishop Gluttony —I will absolutely annihilate you]

[Puck: Even though I still think it's not that simple...]

Puck's last few words didn't enter Subaru's mind.

Subaru, right now, is defending that final fragment of hope like the very last bastion in his heart.

—When he arrived in the Capital, he found Rem after the attack, and when he knew all was lost, without a shred of hesitation, Subaru stabbed a dagger into his own throat.

What he felt at that moment, he could no longer remember. Everything had turned out so perfectly, so perfect beyond everyone's expectations — But the truth is, throwing it all away in that instant, none of it mattered to him.

If he lost Rem, if it meant walking into a future without her, no matter how many times he must endure that pain, he will —— Only this, Subaru clearly remembers.

Penetrating his throat, in blood, pain, searing heat, and loss, he lost all consciousness.

When he woke, what he saw was Rem lying in a bed.

The save point had moved forward. The place of return had changed. Subaru saw hell, and only hell.

Again! It must be some mistake, he must kill himself again... But Subaru hesitated. He was not afraid of pain or death. But he realized...

...Even if he returned to the previous save point, he could not save her.

At the save point before the battle with Betelgeuse, after the the battle with the White Whale, Subaru and Rem had already went in separate directions for several hours. It is too late to catch them before the ambush. But even if he could, Emilia will be abandoned. And even if he sent the expedition to Emilia with the plan and rushed to the ambush, how will he defeat two Sin Archbishops?

To defeat Betelgeuse, Subaru's presence is indispensable, and Emilia's escape cannot be managed without Wilhelm's protection.

To sacrifice Emilia to save Rem, or to sacrifice Rem to save Emilia —Without sacrificing one or the other he couldn't save anyone at all.

Faced with this impossible choice, Subaru lowered the dagger from his throat.

Unlike being erased by the White Whale's mist, though forgotten by all the world, Rem's body remains here. Beside her, unable to do anything, he merely sat there in a daze...

But that time spent in cruel futility ends here. It ends now.

Holding Rem's sleeping hand, Subaru confirmed his resolve. Of one thing he is certain, —I will

[Subaru: Retrieve... Rem, I promise... I will retrieve your memories]

It was a promise. That right in front of your eyes, the man you fell in love with, will become the greatest hero the world has ever seen.

We are still half way on that path, aren't we?

[Subaru: I promise... Your hero will come for you. Wait just a little longer]

Lifting his face, teeth bared. It was a declaration of war.

The fiends shall regret the day they laid hands on what is sacred and inviolable.

For I, Natsuki Subaru, shall bring punishment upon you.

[Subaru: I will —I promise I will!]

In the days starting from Zero, I can no longer endure a single one without the thought of you by my side.

So I must retrieve...

The days that are lost, the days I have walked with you, and all the days I will walk with you again... With my own hands, I swear I will take it back once more!

ARC 4
THE EVERLASTING COVENANT
Chapter 1 [The Place They Returned To]

The grey gloom of the sky mirrored the state of Subaru's heart.

In front of Crusch's mansion, six dragon carriages lined up in a row. Those that fled from the Roswaal domain, the villagers of Arlam(or so the place was called) were all loaded up. Only the final special carriage was reserved for Subaru and Emilia.

The road will be long. So unlike the way here, they won't be riding with the children, since there is a mountain of things he has to say to Emilia... and he wasn't so insensitive as to let the children ride alongside "her"...

[I will become rather lonely]

Silently gazing at the dragon carriages, Subaru heard a voice from behind him.

Turning to see, it was Crusch looking at him. Her long green hair caressed by the misty wind, she closed her eyes, and seeing her, Subaru scratched his head.

[Subaru: It's not like anything will happen if I stay here, I'd feel bad to just keep sponging on your hospitality —to be honest, I really should be taking some time to recover, but it can't be helped]

Opening and closing his hands, Subaru thought about the state of his health, and smiled awkwardly. Back then, it was to recover his health that he came to Crusch's mansion in the first place. Roswaal had a hand in sending him here, and it still annoys him to see that Clown's wishes fulfilled so perfectly. As a matter of principle, even if he fulfills any of that guy's wishes, it should be by continually stomping it.

[Crusch: Natsuki Subaru-sama, you know you're welcome to sponge here as long as you like... even though it's hard to say that out loud]

[Subaru: Thank you for your offer... but while I want to, there is still a pile of loose ends I need to tie up. There's the White Whale, "Sloth", and the whole deal with the merchants guild...]

Declining Crusch's offer, Subaru shook his head. He was thinking of Julius and Anastasia.

Out of the three factions that joined forces against the White Whale and "Sloth", only Anastasia's purely benefited.

Crusch's camp, by slaying the White Whale, had accomplished a glorious feat four hundred years in the making — but Crusch's amnesia was a devastating blow.

As for Subaru and Emilia's camp that defeated "Sloth", the supposedly well-informed Roswaal's absence from it all doesn't bode well at all.

In terms of casualties, although they didn't suffer heavy losses like Crusch's camp, to Subaru, his loss was far too great to bear.

In comparison, only losing a portion of her mercenaries and supply trains, Anastasia's forces are almost completely intact. And even though she wasn't the main player in either battle, her forces made tremendous contributions with minimal losses, a highly profitable investment.

While the damage to their forces made the other two factions hesitate in publicizing their victories, it was not a concern for Anastasia.

In order to check Anastasia's ascent, close coordination between Crusch and Emilia's factions will be necessary...

....Seeing Subaru deep in those thoughts, Crusch yawned lazily. Subaru's brows frowned when he saw this, and Crusch, an embarrassed expression on her face, only waved [nothing] with her hands...

[Subaru: Sorry to be so sentimental... but I'm ashamed I can't repay you for your kindness...]

[Crusch: The ones that repay favors right away are not worthy opponents. Don't worry about it when there is so much on your plate. Besides, we received plenty in return already]

Listening to Crusch's courteous words, Subaru turned to look at the front of the special carriage. Compared to the others, it looked like an overly-decorated high-class VIP dragon carriage, and the honor of pulling it goes to—

[Crusch: Such an unambitious request... you want to treat this ground dragon's wounds and take care of her?]

[Subaru: I do owe this ground dragon a great deal. Even though it's only been a relatively short time, the number of times we rode into the brink of death is more than I can count. And I intend to face many more challenges together with her, so I won't consider Patrasche to be a toy]

[Crusch: —In that case, I have no need to worry]

The ground dragon— Patrasche glanced at Subaru as he spoke, and then, as if rejecting his admiration, turned to Wilhelm. The old swordsman, who up to now had been checking the carriages before their departure, nodded at their conversation.

[Wilhelm: "Diana" is the most difficult breed of ground dragons to please. To shield her master with her own body, Subaru must be quite adored by this ground dragon]

[Subaru: Even though I don't remember much, before the battle with the White Whale, I just decided to choose this one all of a sudden]

It's true they have a bond. This was more than fortunate, because if he picked any other ground dragon, whether it's the White Whale or Betelgeuse, he would not have made it out alive. Anyway,

[Subaru: I can no longer be satisfied by any other ground dragon besides you... Ah, seductive Patrasche!]

Touching the smooth texture of the side of Patrasche's stomach with the palm of his hand as if to show off his affections, Subaru looked into Patrasche's rather pissed-off looking eyes.

To Subaru's overly intimate molestation, the ground dragon reacted with an expression of profound disgust from the bottom of its heart, and jerked her body as if trying to break Subaru's fingers.

[Subaru: Ow! That's overreacting just to hide your embarrassment! Though with all that exercise wiping windows back in Junior High, my fingers won't break so easily!]

[Wilhelm: The ground dragon is joking with you. Such amiable communication must be an indication of the unwavering trust between you two]

[Subaru: Does that look like communication? It seemed to be just me offering my love one-sidedly and Patrasche rejecting me with her body language!]

That unspoken trust on the battlefield... is woefully absent right now. Now it's just a sassy attitude... But in the end, even with the cold demeanor, Patrasche allowed him to pet her.

Anyway,

[Subaru: So I got my name into the credits for slaying the White Whale, and then I saved Emilia by killing “Sloth”. And now I got my beloved ground dragon... The reward is quite nice isn’t it]

[Wilhelm: Killing the White Whale, how significant that was, Subaru-dono not realizing this is something admirable indeed. Perhaps one day the world will properly thank you for this great achievement. I look forward to that day]

[Subaru: Yeah I think so too! Wait.. but wasn’t I just running around the Whale’s nose like bait all that time?]

To Subaru’s not even humble words, Wilhelm looked on with a warm smile. His insides itching from that warmth, Subaru shook his head as if trying to get rid of that feeling.

[Subaru: All that aside... I won’t be seeing you for a while Wilhelm-san. Please take care of your wound]

[Wilhelm: Sorry I made you worry. It seems the distance is getting farther, the bleeding has stopped. But no matter what, the day when I fight alongside Subaru-dono again will come. Until then]

Wilhelm’s wound — the unhealable wound dealt by the Previous Generation Sword Saint, Thearesia van Astria. Mentioning this brought a sharpness into Wilhelm’s gaze. His mind turned to the Sin Archbishops that assaulted Crusch, “Greed” and “Gluttony”.

If the death of the “Sword Demon”‘s wife had to do with something other than the White Whale, these two are the most likely suspects.

Subaru, same as Wilhelm, holds a strong hatred for Gluttony. No matter what, they must eventually come face to face with this Sin Archbishop. While the Witch Cult is something they would rather avoid, “Gluttony” is an entirely different matter. For they must defeat this

Sin Archbishop to retrieve those irreplaceable things... Crusch's memory is one, and more importantly—

[Subaru-kyun, Rem-chan is settled in, want to check?]

Saying this, from the carriage window poked out a head with cat-like ears — Ferris. Seeing Ferris step out of Patrasche's special carriage, Subaru walked over. Peeking in, in the spacious interior, some seats had been replaced with a makeshift bed, and on it, a girl was sleeping.

She was not wearing the familiar maid's dress, but wore a soft blue sleeping gown, that matched the color of her hair. A girl in an unwaking slumber, forgotten by all the world. She loved Subaru, and Subaru loved her. Perhaps, she was that kind of girl.

[Subaru: That thing is safe right?]

[Ferris: Hey I've been careful, I am a healer nyan. Though Rem's physical wounds are already healed, she is no longer a patient nyan]

Silently, Subaru gazed at her sleeping face. Ferris' words were brash, but the side of Ferris' face showed something different from the usual playfulness. Perhaps Ferris was feeling the pain of his own powerlessness, not in regards to Rem, but Ferris' peerless master, Crusch.

[Ferris: You really want to bring her with you?]

[Subaru: Yes, I'll bring her with me. She won't get better by staying here... no I didn't mean it's your fau...]

[Ferris: I know nyan, Subaru-kyun isn't that mean nyan]

Seeing Subaru's embarrassment after his remarks, Ferris smiled awkwardly.

[Ferris: In fact]

Pointing a finger at Subaru,

[Ferris: Aside from Rem, an even bigger concern is Subaru-kyun isn't it?]

[Subaru: Me?]

[Ferris: Don't play dumb nyan, your gate is over-strained nyan. While healing you I had to forcefully inject a large amount of Mana through your gate, it could be a bit damaged nyan. Are you feeling weak or tired, physically and magically?]

At Ferris' question, Subaru turned his neck and shoulders. Spinning around, he couldn't find anything wrong. He jumped a bit and there seemed to be nothing to worry about.

[Subaru: No problem. Both the used parts and the unused parts are fine. Putting the gate aside, I don't usually use magic anyway]

[Ferris: You're not a magic user after all. If it's Ferris, Ferris would have to avoid using magic except in emergencies nyan... en, that's good nyan]

Seeing Subaru aloof to the critical condition of his health, Ferris gave up. With wide, round eyes, Ferris looked around Subaru's neck, pulling around his collar.

[Ferris: But no more straining yourself. Even though Ferris can squeeze out every toxin from Subaru-kyun's body, if your gate shatters into a thousand pieces Ferris won't be able to fix it nyan. So take the time to properly recover it... about two months nyan]

[Subaru: Two months without magic... for a guy who didn't use magic for 17 years, it's nothing!]

Joking around after hearing the diagnosis... come to think of it, Subaru hasn't even been in this world for two months, even though from his perspective it was more like 4 months — it all feels like a very long time.

Thinking about all that happened since he came to this world, how hard would it be to finally rest for two months? He wasn't sure himself.

[Subaru: En... although I do always manage to get myself caught up in some disaster... Wait, did I just trigger a "Flag"!?! I think I heard the sound effect!!]

[Ferris: Too bad, Ferris is no expert on treating brain problems nyan]

Subaru apparently appalled by his own remarks, Ferris looked at him rather disinterestedly.

Affected by this reaction, Subaru decided this conversation should be coming to an end. After some thought, he reached out his hand to Ferris.

[Ferris: Nyan?]

[Subaru: No, I really should thank you for everything you've done to help me. For healing me, and when we're against the Whale and "Sloth" if it weren't for you, it would've all been a mess..... and for Rem, thank you]

[Ferris:nyan. You don't seem to be mocking me nyan, so be it]

[Subaru: Ooo! My ability <> has activated! Stay calm!]

A clumsy expression of thanks, but Ferris seemed to like it. In any case, his feelings got through. Ferris held onto the out-reached hand, and they shook.

[Subaru: Such soft, slender fingers... I can't imagine what you'd be like with masculine hands]

[Ferris: On the cute and perfect Ferris, wouldn't that be too disappointing nyan? Be it body hair or skin, everything on Ferris is all natural nyan]

Ferris raising a hand with pride, Subaru caught a glimpse of the impeccable white legs under Ferris' skirt. Taking in the sheer beauty of its form, Subaru's shoulders dropped dejectedly.

[Subaru: But, he's a guy...]

[Ferris: Yep, Ferris is a man in body and soul nyan]

[Subaru: How do you get so smug about it? Which part of that is like a man?]

Dressed like a beautiful girl, calling Ferris a man is just too much — Although Subaru isn't traditional or anything like that, even he knew Ferris' behavior is the opposite of what would be called manly.

Against Subaru's question, Ferris placed a finger on the corner of those lips. And with a charming shake of the waist,

[Ferris: Because, Crusch-sama said this suits Ferris, what I am, I am, and this most suits the radiance of Ferris' soul. —Crusch-sama's words, Ferris shall repay with everything that I am]

[Subaru: But...]

...the current Crusch doesn't know this... but Subaru held back his words. Even if he doesn't say it, Ferris already knows. And if he does say it, it will only hurt.

Subaru, more than anyone, would hate to do this. If someone talked about Rem, Subaru would be just as agitated. Perhaps Ferris knew this as well.

[—No matter what becomes of the House of Karsten]

[Subaru:?]

Suddenly, the voice struck Subaru's eardrums.

Quiet, cold, a voice of frozen emotion.

Who that voice belonged to... if he heard it now, it would still give him pause.

Head lowered, Ferris' expression is hidden behind the hair of his forehead, impossible to see.

In this way, Ferris held tight onto Subaru's hand.

[Ferris: Only Crusch-sama, I will protect with my life]

[Subaru: ...Ferris?]

[Ferris: That – Is – Why]

In front of the dumbfounded Subaru, Ferris' head suddenly lifted, smiling with a jubilant voice. But compared to the playful, mischievous eyes Subaru was so used to seeing, in this instant, it appeared as if those eyes were lying.

[Ferris: Remember the agreement, Subaru-kyun! Otherwise all the Mana in your body will go on a rampage frying your brain until you die nyan]

[Subaru: What are you saying with that smile on your face!? And why are you threatening an ally!?]

[Ferris: Threatening? More like a death sentence nyan]

[Subaru: Worse than I thought!]

Flinging Ferris' hand out of his own, Subaru turned away. For a brief moment, in all this commotion

—he faintly hoped perhaps Rem would react.

Sighing slightly, he pushed his dashed hopes out of his mind.

Near the luggage outside the dragon carriage, he found Emilia and Crusch talking.

[Emilia: Ah, Subaru. Is Rem-san's bed prepared?]

[Subaru: Yep Ferris set it up perfectly. Behold! This is me and Patrasche's GREAT CIRCUS COMBO! We'll show you something even the Great Kinoshita Circus wouldn't be able to show you!]

[Emilia: Even though I don't know what you're talking about, I got a bad feeling about this... let's not do the Great Circus]

[Subaru: The sky! It's too unfortunate! But my heart had already been beating up and down expectant of Emilia-tan's misattribution of arousal!]

Subaru called it the "In this speeding carriage my life is in danger, could this increase in heartbeat be LOVE!?" self-directed battle plan.

But to hear Emilia say "Rem-san"... a piercing pain of unfathomable degree lingered in Subaru heart, refusing to disappear.

For an instant, Emilia's eyes caught onto Subaru's mouth, which had suddenly stopped moving. But before her words came out, Ferris came up behind Subaru.

[Ferris: Well, the dragon carriage is prepared nyan. Sorry it took so long nyan. It's sad to say goodbye — Crusch-sama, anything to say?]

[Crusch: En, yes]

Ferris went to Crusch's side. Subaru went to Emilia's. Taking them both within her sight, Crusch took a deep breath, and placed a hand in front of her chest.

[Crusch: First, though I have said it many times before, you have my deepest gratitude. Even though I can no longer remember, I know that before I lost my memory, I wanted us to cooperate, and to be friends. I thank you once again]

[Emilia: No... I, Crusch-sama, there is nothing to thank me for. These days I've only been kept in the dark and left out of everything...]

[Subaru: En, it's true Emilia-tan didn't do anything. But I have everything handled so don't worry. After all, my achievements are my Emilia-tan's achievements too!]

Seeing Emilia shriveling in embarrassment, Subaru pounded his chest proclaiming this. Stealing a glance at Subaru, Emilia nodded slightly.

[Emilia: Thank you Subaru... Even though I don't remember becoming "your" Emilia...]

[Subaru: M – my battle plan to "subconsciously inject impression of a romantic relationship into third party listeners" has been seen through...!?!]

[Emilia: Because I was listening carefully... oh, sorry about that]

All the air pressure deflating from his chest, Subaru sank down, and Emilia apologized to Crusch, who was quietly observing their amiable exchange.

[Crusch: No, the relationship between you two seem wonderful. I must quickly work to return to the way I was with Ferris and Wilhelm]

[Ferris: Ferris will always be open to Crusch-sama in both body and soul nyan!]

Ferris, covering his cheeks with both hands, swerved left and right. While Ferris was swerving like an octopus behind her, Crusch seemed to accept it as it is, with a warm, even feminine, smile emerging on her face.

[Crusch: We will meet again very soon, I think, Emilia-sama and Subaru-sama. I wish we would forever be friends]

That was not a lie, it must have been her true thoughts... Subaru thought this.

Despite losing her memory, she did not lose the nobility of her heart. Honesty illuminates her conduct, false flattery and lies are not compatible with that.

Perhaps because that came through so clearly, Emilia's eyes opened wide with surprise, her lips trembling faintly.

[Emilia: I am... For Crusch-sama, I am an opposing Candidate. The Alliance... one day it will return to competition between us]

[Crusch: En, that is true. With Emilia-sama as an opponent, I will take care not to fall behind, so I will do my best as well]

[Emilia: And even without that, I am a Half-Elf. With silver hair... Doesn't it scare you?]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan that's...]

She didn't need to ask that, Subaru thought, trying to stop her. Seeing the desperate determination on the side of Emilia's face, he knew this conversation mustn't continue.

Emilia was serious, in asking that question. The emotional part of her knows she should never bring up her identity lightly.

Above all, to bring it up in front of Crusch Karsten. Subaru knew, to let this continue would be...

[Crusch: The soul determines the value of its own existence. For myself, and for others as well, to live with the Soul's fullest radiance, unashamed, is the way we should live]

[Emilia: —]

[Crusch: Somehow it feels like I've said that many times before. How should I say it.... Now that I've listened to myself, that was pretty sophisticated, wasn't it?]

Crusch covered her mouth and couldn't hold in her laugh. Hearing this, Emilia stood dumbfounded, and did not say a word.

[Crusch: Emilia-sama, are you ashamed of the way you carry out your life?]

[Emilia: ...I'm, not. Even if everyone around me thinks so, as long as I am not hated by myself, I can carry on and live this way]

[Crusch: If so, then don't regret anything. Improve yourself, try your hardest, and stay true to the self you deserve. —You have a beautiful Soul]

Smiling, Crusch extended the hand in front of her chest toward Emilia.

[Crusch: To get to know you, I am happy. Fear? Not a single bit]

Biting her lips, Emilia carved those words into her memory, her chest hurting with emotion. She gazed at the outstretched hand. Crusch patiently waited for her. Then, Emilia's fingers met the palm of Crusch's hand, and they exchanged a handshake softly.

[Crusch: No matter what, I expect we will meet again soon]

[Emilia: M-me..... no. Me too, this time I should stand tall in front of Crusch-sama, shouldn't I? Until then, I wish you the best of health]

This way, the two fellow Candidates of the Royal Selection, their promise to each do their best, was sealed.

Looking on from the side, Subaru's heart swelled with the sense of accomplishment. That was one of the goals of Subaru's struggle after struggle... Even though in the end it's impossible for everything to be perfect...

[Subaru:after everything we accomplished... why do I still have this sad expression on my face? I don't want to blame it on you... I don't.....]

Glancing toward the dragon carriage, appearing in Subaru's eyes was the girl sleeping inside.

In such a happy occasion, Rem would not forgive me like this... Rem wouldn't want to... I'm so selfish aren't I?

[Crusch: Natsuki Subaru-sama, please take care. I will look forward to your future activity... and her recovery]

[Subaru: Much more activity from me... I don't think that's a good idea... To be honest, I'm the kind of guy that runs around trying to do everything as the last resort and still ends up being completely useless. About Rem... Miss Crusch is not an outsider. No matter what, she will recover. I promise, she will]

Crusch extended her hand to Subaru. But to shake hands in this state, isn't that way too embarrassing? To cover up his embarrassment, Subaru gave her a high five.

A small sound rang out, and the brief contact between Subaru and Crusch's hands ended. Her hand bouncing off, Crusch's eyes blinked ever so slightly.

[Crusch: We will certainly meet again]

With these words, the master and servant bowed, seeing Subaru and Emilia off.

On the road home, a strange, stifling gloom descended on the dragon carriage.

The carriage itself, Crusch had gifted to Subaru along with Patrasche, as another sign of gratitude. Even without the ornamentation, it was clear that it was an expensive piece of craftsmanship. But from the softness of the seats to the glamour of the interior, everything felt a bit excessive.

The spacious interior could fit ten people and still have room left over, so it's no wonder they didn't know what to do with themselves, with only three passengers riding inside.

In the carriage, Emilia, Subaru and Rem kept the silence. Rem was, of course, sleeping. Sitting next to her, Subaru was waiting, without even the thought of moving from his place. Perhaps out of consideration for the unconscious Rem, Emilia held back her words.

[Subaru:m]

This is bad, Subaru thought, crossing his arms. Though it'd be outrageous to have a lighthearted conversation under these circumstances, there is so much they need to talk about. They have to decide on their stance regarding the Royal Selection, they need to get up to date on the Alliance with Crusch's faction, and they still haven't even talked about what happened over the past few days.

Then there was Rem. How would she be taken care of at the mansion if no one but Subaru remembers her? Even though it's inevitable, just the thought of what Ram might say, when she sees the unconscious Rem, sends shivers down his spine.

[Emilia: I know you're worried, but right now I feel the atmosphere might have been better if the kids were riding with us...]

Of course, the children were also in the entourage heading back to Roswaal's domain. But they are riding with their parents right now. If they asked about Rem, it would be difficult to explain, and what if the villagers think it's a disease... Unfortunately, the result is the current silence.

What to do now. — It is unusual for Subaru to feel so restrained, he looked up at the ceiling thinking.

[I don't know what, but can't you two think of something to talk about!? Aaaah, I can't take this awkward silence anymore!!]

[Subaru: What are you saying!? Sneaking in out of the blue!? Wait, were you there all along?]

[Otto: That's rude! Of course I was here! Do you even remember the conditions under which I agreed to help you out!?!]

Otto said in an over-exaggerated way, sticking his head into the carriage from the opening in front, sending a bit of spittle flying along with his voice. Otto was the one driving the carriage, sitting outside in the driver's seat. He stuck his head through the hole connecting to the carriage's interior just to comment on the quietness inside the carriage.

At Otto's objections, Subaru tilted his head and nodded while muttering [Ah, ah]

[Subaru: I remember, I remember. Right, I remember you asked me to help you meet Roswaal, right? ... Ah, but, what can I say...]

[Otto: What is it!?!]

[Subaru: Well if you're just chasing after guys it's one thing, but when the guy is Roswaal... I'm straight by the way, and I already have Emilia, so please don't come after me]

[Otto: That's not why I want to talk to him at all! What do you think I am!?!]

[Subaru: A trader looking for some excitement?]

[Otto: Why do you treat me like a pervert!?!]

Looking at Otto as if pitying him from the bottom of his heart, Subaru shook his head sadly from side to side. Emilia, who had been quietly observing their conversation, suddenly opened her eyes wide and said with a surprised expression

[Emilia: You two... are really good friends, aren't you? I'm surprised!!!]

[Subaru: Oy, oy Emilia-tan. Please stop it with the jokes. Putting me in the same basket as this money-grubbing merchant... The only thing I'm greedy for is your love!]

[Otto: You're greedy too then!! Ah, wait, I'm not greedy to begin with!]

[Subaru: Otto, shut up]

Sighing at the travelling merchant, Subaru got up and took hold of the flap to close the window to the driver's seat.

[Otto: Ah, wait, don't just treat me like I'm in the way!]

[Subaru: Ok, shutting you out!]

Pulling the flap shut with a clap, the face of the man who had been trying until the very end to say something finally disappeared. Joining his fingers and stretching his arms like someone who had just completed a rough task, Subaru turned around to see Emilia blankly looking up at him.

[Subaru: ...Puh]

[Emilia: Hihahaha!]

Looking at each others faces, they suddenly burst out laughing.

For a while they let themselves be taken along by their laughter, but after a little while, their laughter started to wane, until silence once again descended upon the carriage.

At that moment,

[Subaru: Letting this heavy atmosphere be, really isn't like me, is it?]

[Emilia: You're right, it's not like you at all. The Subaru I know is a much more spirited, unreasonable, lively person. So much so that no matter what I'm feeling at the moment, he completely blows all my bad feelings away]

[Subaru: I feel like that could also be translated into an airhead who can't read the mood...]

In any case, Otto being there had actually cleared up the mood tremendously. Thanking Otto for this would probably make him angry, but nevertheless, Subaru thanked him in his mind while getting up and sitting down next to Emilia as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Seeing this put a wry smile on Emilia's face.

[Emilia: You always just naturally sit next to me huh, Subaru?]

[Subaru: Well, it's natural for someone to want to sit next to the girl they like, so I want to sit as close as I can, and breathe the same air as you]

[Emilia: Geez, the first half of that sentence was embarrassing, and yet somehow the second half of that sentence gave off a really bad feeling]

Being hit straight with an earnest confession of love made Emilia's face turn red, but the pervertedness of the second half made her scowl. Leaning his head toward her at her reaction, Subaru said

[Subaru: Hmm, I was just trying to act like I always do, you know]

[Emilia: Come to think of it, I guess you've always been like this. It's because you're like this, that I'm never able to just take in what you're saying...]

As Emilia looked at him, her voice turned into a quiet mumble, then faded completely. Subaru scratched his head, considering whether or not he should pick up the conversation...

[Subaru: Guys just can't mentally handle being straightforward, and not pretending to be kidding around when it comes to this sort of thing. Me loving Emilia-tan, me looking at Emilia-tan in a perverted way, and me wanting to help Emilia-tan are all my true, honest feelings. You can believe that you know?]

[Emilia: I believe it, but believing and accepting are two different things...]

[Subaru: That's fine with me, believe me, and I'll work hard until you accept my feelings]

Thinking about it again, that was a pretty aggressive proclamation. In fact, hearing that from Subaru, Emilia's face was blushing.

Fighting hard to remain unflustered, her cheeks and ears already turned so red that her expression couldn't keep up. She must never have had anyone confess their unconditional fondness for her before. Of course Subaru, the one trying to hit on her, didn't have any experience either, so his face was also completely red.

Even so,

[Subaru: Rather than walking on with a downcast expression, this is more like me. Right, Rem?]

[Emilia: ...just now, did you say something?]

[Subaru: I was just thinking how nice it would be to lift up your hair so I could stare at your neck pervertedly]

[Emilia: Right there, you are trying to distract me again... You care a lot about Rem-san, don't you?]

Subaru still trying to wisecrack his way out, Emilia's incisive words blocked his escape. Accepting defeat, Subaru smiled bitterly, and turned toward Rem, still sleeping on the bed.

[Subaru: I do, yes. Immensely... I care about her. I'm always thinking I must do something, and I think, and I want to keep on thinking. Even though I wanted Emilia-tan to be the first in my thoughts, this can't be ranked... I'm sorry]

[Emilia: I'm not a bad child that will get angry and throw a tantrum. I won't get angry about something so important... I can tell just by looking, she is very important to Subaru]

Like Subaru, Emilia turned her narrowed gaze to Rem in her sleep. Her lips trembled. Then after a short moment of hesitation, she asked

[Emilia: You... like her. Don't you?]

[Subaru: I like her. I love her. I love her as much as I love you]

[Emilia: I don't know how I feel about this, but... Subaru, are you the kind of guy that flirts around?]

[Subaru: I thought I was supposed to be a pretty faithful guy, but having someone be so devoted to you is... a guy whose heart isn't moved by that, I don't think he could have a drop of blood or tear in him]

Thinking back to the loops over the past few days, he remembered, how many times he had received Rem's unconditional love. Receiving it all, how could his heart not move? By the time he noticed, her existence inside his heart had already grown far too large to ignore.

[Emilia: Even though you told me that you love me]

[Subaru: Just to make it clear, I love Rem a lot, but Rem still loves me WAY more, you know? She's completely fallen head over heels for me, and I seriously can't understand why]

Hugging his shoulders, he wondered how she could love him so selflessly. To be loved this much by a girl like Rem, was he really worth it?

He still couldn't help but wonder why. But even so... as the man she fell for, the very least he could do, is to try to live up to what she sees in him.

Seeing Subaru's downcast self appraisal, Emilia's lips relaxed.

[Emilia: I think I understand her]

[Subaru: Huh?]

[Emilia: The reason Rem-san came to really love you. I'm sure it's because she got to see Subaru's good side up close, a lot. You're kind of like a disease that sometimes becomes really incredible, and does some really incredible things]

[Subaru: A disease? I... can't actually deny that]

Subaru scratched his cheek and pouted, showing his dissatisfaction. Emilia, unaffected, held her stern expression as if to say "it's true you know", then, closing her eyes

[Emilia: I won't fall for you that easily you know]

[Subaru: That makes the effort all the more worth it! One day, I will make Emilia-tan go all gooey and fall for me, wake Rem from her sleep, and settle this in a nice way. Aaaah, I'm smiling just thinking about it!]

To have Emilia and Rem each pull on one of his hands, fighting over his one and only body. That would be a such a blissful, incredible sight.

Which is why definitely, definitely one day—

[Subaru: I'll have you two pull me until I split into a thousand pieces!]

[Emilia: I have no idea what you're thinking, but I feel like I have to say this: I'm not going to do anything like that!]

After that conversation, the discussion inside the carriage went on smoothly.

After all, they've been waiting for the larger half of a day to talk. And since there was a lot they had to talk about, they had only just enough time to do it.

Sharing everything about the past few days with Emilia, eventually Otto joined their conversation as well, and even took part in their planning for the future.

To sum it up,

[Subaru: Basically, if we don't meet with Roswaal then we can't plan anything, right?]

After all that, the conclusion was the same as the starting point of the conversation.

Roswaal is the only person who understands the full capabilities and powers of Emilia's Faction, so nothing can proceed without him.

[Subaru: Well, if Ram, who went to the Sanctuary, met Roswaal, we could naturally get him to return to the Mansion. But I'd slap him in the face first, before we have a good talk with him]

[Otto: You're very aggressive toward your employer, huh, Natsuki-san?]

[Subaru: I think I have a right to do that after all he did! He'd deserve every bit of it!]

Thinking back on the mess Roswaal left for Subaru to clean up, this is more or less an appropriate response. In fact, Emilia didn't seem to have any intention of stopping Subaru, as if permitting him to do it "just this one time".

As their discussion was summed up and their topic turned toward matters of the Roswaal domain, their dragon carriage left the forests and entered the village

—they instantly realized something was wrong.

The village that Subaru had gotten so used to seeing, seemed just as desolate and dreary as right after the battle with Betelgeuse. There was not even any sign of the soldiers of the Expedition that stayed behind.

To put it simply, it seems none of the villagers had returned.

[Otto: I don't see anyone, Natsuki-san. It doesn't look like the area was devastated or anything, it just looks like nobody is here]

Getting off the dragon carriage, Otto voiced his thoughts as he looked around the village with several of the returning villagers. Even Subaru, who looked with a different group, came to the same conclusion.

In the somber silence, memories of past loops — where the villagers were slaughtered, massacred by Betelgeuse' fingers, all of a sudden struck Subaru like a nightmare returning. But he was certain that he was just overthinking it.

But then, that raises another question

[Subaru: Ram said from here to the Sanctuary is only about 7 to 8 hours... but then why are they later than us, if we stayed in the Capital for three days?]

[Otto: They might not know that we took down the Witch Cult, so maybe they're being cautious?]

[Subaru: Roswaal abandoning his lands? I assume if Roswaal fought "Sloth" face-to-face, Roswaal would probably win. Even if it isn't "Sloth"s style to fight in the open, Roswaal should have at least come here to scout]

Roswaal, who can even fly, could easily return to his territory. If he intended to, he could scout the perimeters of the Mansion for any remaining threats, and ensure the land was safe to return to. But he didn't.

[Subaru: Either he's being overly cautious or...]

[Emilia: Something's happened in the Sanctuary?]

Both Subaru and Emilia's opinions matched. Looking at each other, they shared a nod.

No matter what, they have to find out what the situation at the Sanctuary is.

Besides their concerns, the villagers had worries of their own.

After all, about 60% of the villagers had headed for the Sanctuary. Those that returned from the Capital: the children who resolved to accompany Emilia, their parents, and the young men's militia that went with them, only comprised about 40% of the villagers. Without the rest, the functioning of the village is severely affected.

Besides, the people's minds tend to always turn to the worst.

[Subaru: Anyway, we have to do something... For now, let's head back to the Mansion. I want to settle Rem down as well. Plus, Otto, you don't have anywhere to stay, so come to the Mansion with us]

[Otto: What!? To trouble the ma-Margrave for lodging!? If I have to be in such a heck of a situation, I would rather sleep in the dragon carriage!]

[Subaru: Shut up, you're already involved. Better get used to it because I'll use you until you die off!]

Ignoring Otto's objections, Subaru said goodbye to the villagers and told Patrasche to head for the Mansion.

In a distance of 15 minutes on foot, and 5 minutes by carriage, lies the nostalgic Mansion of Roswaal.

Last time, he didn't have the chance to appreciate the sight, so when he looked up at it again, this time, there was something emotional about it all.

[Subaru: Well, nothing seems to have changed. ...Ram and the others don't seem to have returned, either]

[Emilia: But, Beatrice must still be inside. I hope she knows where the Sanctuary is]

[Subaru: Wha- really? Crap... I thought Emilia-tan would know where the Sanctuary is. Then how do we confirm if Roswaal's alright?]

The fundamental objective of their plan collapsing, Subaru furrowed his brows at the looming darkness ahead.

Emilia's beautiful face also showed the colors of grief. Otto, unable to join in the conversation, only looked up, enchanted by the great Mansion and its surroundings, as if driving through a dream.

[Subaru: Tch. Crap. Well, we just have to hope Beatrice knows something about it]

[Otto: Hey, why were you clicking your tongue while staring right at me?]

[Subaru: Tch. It's your self-consciousness. No one cares about you as much as you think]

[Otto: Wow that's a terrible comment!]

Ignoring the partially depressed Otto, Subaru parked the dragon carriage in the front yard, and headed straight to the entrance.

First, get Beatrice, then, scout the Mansion, then, secure a bed for Rem, then think of future plans again—

[Subaru: I'm back, Roswaal's Mansion! Here comes my nostalgic h...]

Saying that, pushing open the grand door, Subaru's voice clogged up.

Because what greeted him was a completely different sight than what he expected.

The entrance hall was spread with gorgeous carpets, in the corners of the stairs leading to the upper floors were expensive looking vases filled with colorful flowers.

From the ceiling, hung beautiful crystal lamps that could be the chandeliers of this Parallel World.

The familiar entrance hall... was very much different from what he expected.

Instead of what he expected—

[Subaru: It's not even vandalized..... it's actually arranged!?!]

The mats were straightened nicely without a single crease, and the flowers in the vases in the corners of the stairs were blooming vibrantly, the chandeliers were delicately taken care of and were shining graciously, even more than usual.

Stunned by this surreal scene, Subaru lost his words and stood still.

Because of his amazement, his reactions were all too slow.

[Subaru: —Who is it!?!]

A small, weak, almost inaudible sound. Subaru frantically shot his glance toward its direction.

But, when he noticed the Shadow, it was already too late.

The Shadow had already ran up behind him and then—

Subaru saw it. From behind him, as if eclipsing the moon, the shadow engulfed him whole.

In that shadow... a mouth filled with white fangs, as if of a beast, were clear in the back of his eyes.

—And in the next moment, before he could even realize... Subaru's consciousness, and his world, had been dragged to darkness.

Chapter 2 [Insults and Gratitude]

—*Oy, Subaru, dying here would be pretty miserable.*

Still muddled, lying there shaking his head, Subaru lifted himself up and looked around. He was usually good at waking up, but the reason he couldn't get his thoughts together was simply because he wasn't exactly "sleeping". He tried hard to remember what had happened before he lost consciousness, but the first thing that occurred to him was that he was in a very familiar room.

[Subaru: This is the Mansion's living room... isn't it?]

[Oh, Subaru, you're awake?]

A voice mumbled as if trying to make sure, then the door opened and Emilia's face poked through.

Her silver hair in a braid, she had a slightly bright expression on her face as she walked over to Subaru on the couch, and bending over, she met his gaze.

Being stared at so intently by her wide, round eyes, Subaru shrank down a little.

[Subaru: Uhm, Emilia-tan, what happened?]

[Emilia: As soon as you entered the mansion we heard you scream. Otto and I were really shocked. Then when we ran inside to see...]

[Subaru: I, was sleeping?]

[Emilia: Saying it like that is a little deceiving.....but it's not technically wrong, I suppose?]

Emilia put a finger to her lips, and tilted her head slightly to the side. There was no sense of urgency in her reply.

Scrambling when he just woke up, now seeing her in this relaxed manner, Subaru realized there was no emergency. Yet even so, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was out of the ordinary.

He was certain that just before he lost consciousness, some kind of animal with sharp fangs had—

[Miss Emilia, might I have a moment?]

There was a knock on the door from the outside, followed by the sound of a woman's voice calling out to Emilia. Looking in the direction of the voice, she gave her assent with a small [Sure], and the door opened slowly.

Looking at the door casually opening, Subaru couldn't help but feel mystified.

—I don't recall ever hearing that voice before.

His doubt was soon confirmed when he saw what stood just outside the doorway.

[I brought drinks and additional hand towels —Oh, I see you are awake already]

The form of the smiling woman imprinted itself into Subaru's eyes.

It was a woman with long, almost translucent blonde hair, the lines of her back were in perfect posture. Her appearance and behavior was in every way refined, and in her fluid motions there was not a hint of unnecessary movement.

She was wearing the same familiar outfit as other servants of the Roswaal Mansion —the cute and practical maid's uniform, with not so much as a crease or wrinkle visible.

The plate in her hands held a water pitcher and hand towels, which she placed softly down on the stand in the center of the room without making a sound. —If she were being scored, she would have passed with flying colors...

...that is, only if you overlooked her ferocious-looking physique and her fiendish smile.

The uniform may be worn perfectly, but the one wearing it was slightly taller than Subaru, with an athletic build similar to his. If she were a he, it would have seemed healthy and strong, but when it was on a female, everything instantly crumbled.

What's more, the smile at the end of her perfectly fluid motion —was completely ruined by the set of sharp fangs peeking out through the corner of her mouth. Looking even closer, there was something unnatural about the sharpness of her gaze, and her green pupils seemed to give off a glinting light, like a carnivorous, feline beast eyeing its prey.

[Frederica: It is a pleasure to meet you. I am a servant of the household of Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers, Frederica Baumann...]

[Subaru: Scary face—!?!]

Her respectful introduction was interrupted by the overly candor words that slipped out of Subaru's mouth. Upon hearing this, the woman's expression congealed, and after her fiendish eyes blinked several times —tears began to form.

[Frederica: ...sniffle, sniffle...]

[Subaru: Wha...?]

[Emilia: Subaru you dunce!!]

Without a word, the woman turned her face away, and even Subaru was shocked. Right after, he was assaulted by both an angry voice, and the painful sensation of having his ear pulled. [Ow, ow!] Letting out a cry and turning to look, he saw Emilia with her usually gentle brows furrowed angrily.

[Emilia: That's a terrible thing to say to a girl! Frederica did so much to take care of you and you...]

[Frederica: I-I ask that you might let it go, Miss Emilia. It is quite alright. I was...I was the one in the wrong after all. I was so happy to have been called back to the mansion, I got too over-excited...and forgot that my looks are usually unpleasant for many...]

Pulling on the hem of Emilia's sleeve, she— the woman called Frederica was shaking her head. With her other hand she was covering her mouth.

[Frederica: I apologize for startling you so. More than that, I did something very inappropriate a short while ago. I never thought I would mistake Natsuki Subaru-sama for an intruder]

[Subaru: Intruder....ah, wait a minute. I think I understand what happened now]

Released from Emilia's chastisement for the moment, Subaru massaged his ear while taking in her words. In fact, he kind of realized the gist of what happened.

Basically, the mysterious figure he ran into right after entering the mansion was—

[Subaru: When I returned to the mansion, Frederica-san thought I was an intruder, and so tried to take me out. Then, Emilia-tan came in after me, and cleared up the misunderstanding, and that brings us to now...right?]

[Frederica: That's exactly right...you really can process things quickly I see]

[Subaru: There are things I can't read from just the situation though...no, before that]

Frederica's agreement confirming his thoughts, Subaru then turned his gaze to Emilia who was now standing behind Frederica, nudging her chin to point in Frederica's direction. He was painfully aware of the meaning behind Emilia's action. So Subaru stood up from the couch, and facing Frederica, said

[Subaru: Nice to meet you, I am very sorry for saying something so uncalled for all of a sudden. I know I can't make excuses like having just woken up, or that I was just joking around and expect to be forgiven. You can decide whether to boil or fry me...though I would be really thankful if there wasn't much pain involved]

To say he was acting like a man, it was more like Subaru dipped his head while saying this somewhat limp apology.

They definitely started off on the wrong foot, but unlike her, who had only attacked a suspicious intruder, Subaru's words were just completely rude. So, just as he said, if it would clear up her anger, Subaru would willingly accept any kind of punishment.

Preferably without physical pain, and his hopes were rather leaning towards emotional abuse instead...

That much was the commitment of the man Subaru's rather effeminate apology.

[Frederica: —Haha, you really are a funny guy]

With those words, her smile hiding behind the hand covering her mouth, Frederica blew it all away.

At the question mark floating above Subaru's head, Frederica bowed, the translucent, golden hair flowing around her face.

[Frederica: I should really be the one apologizing. On Miss Emilia's request, I have been testing you]

[Subaru: Testing?]

At Frederica's words, both Subaru and Emilia tilted their heads. They had no idea what she was talking about.

It'd be fine if Subaru was confused, but if he were to believe her words, then it would be strange to see Emilia showing the same air of confusion as well. Looking at their synchronous response, Frederica's smile deepened.

[Frederica: Even though I may have been acting according to my sense of duty to protect the mansion, what I did to Subaru-sama was still rude. I was prepared, or rather left with no other choice, but to be relieved of my position after such an act]

[Subaru: No, I think you jumped to that conclusion way too soon. I'm a guy who will understand if we talk things out, right?]

[Frederica: Then, Miss Emilia asserted herself ever so firmly. She really tried so hard, I thought for sure even my face would turn red from the flowery things she was saying about Subaru...]

[Subaru: Wha!?!]

Shocked by what she had just said, Subaru let out a strangled cry, looking towards Emilia. While Emilia was standing there trying so hard to hide her own deep scarlet countenance.

[Emilia: Fre—de—ri—ca—!]

Hands on her hips, Emilia uncharacteristically let out a hysterical voice, glaring sharply at the maid. On the receiving end of all that, Frederica calmly retorted

[Frederica: Oh my, so scary... I see Miss Emilia hasn't changed, still not cute at all. Normally, whether what I said was true or not, turning red and getting flustered would have been the prettiest response]

[Emilia: Eh, really...? Wait, I'm not going to get tricked today. Even someone like me, always getting tricked, would learn to know better! That's right, I know when you're lying, one of your eyes goes lazy!]

[Frederica: I had no idea that was the case. By the way Miss Emilia, did you know that whenever you lie, your ears get a little longer?]

[Emilia: No way!?!]

Emilia's expression of victory, an arm outstretched and a finger pointing towards Frederica, was interrupted when she darted her hands back to grab both her ears. Getting this response, at that point Frederica's victory was complete.

Still flustered, Emilia seemed not to have realized she lost, but Subaru, who had been watching her intently, let out a sigh and shrugged his shoulders.

[Subaru: Seems like I've been completely defeated... My name is Natsuki Subaru and... do I even need to do an introduction?]

[Frederica: Yes, of course. I would love to hear it. Let's start over and get to know each other properly this time]

With those words, Frederica removed the hand covering her mouth, revealing a smile lined with pointed fangs. This time, seeing her weaponized-smile, all the wind left Subaru's lungs.

[Subaru: Come to think of it, I think I heard of you... a maid who quit a little while ago before I arrived here, right? I came to the mansion about a month ago... so it's been three months since you left?]

[Frederica: That seems to be right. I had resigned my position due to personal reasons, and I still remember how painfully lonely it felt, leaving here. ... But it seems that I was able to return much sooner than I expected]

Covering her mouth with her sleeve, Frederica smiled. As long as she covers her mouth, her beautiful golden hair and her cold, barely passable gaze, would combine into something even resembling feminine beauty. But her mischievous personality and her mouth-full of fangs tend to negate that no matter what.

In the living room of the Roswaal Mansion, Subaru and Frederica have just exchanged some basic information beyond their names. Listening to her self-introduction again, he seemed to recall having heard that name before.

[Subaru: Three months ago, so that means you're acquainted with Emilia-tan, right?]

[Emilia: Hrmph! That would be correct, yes]

[Subaru: Who says 'Hrmph' these days? Also sulking like that is so outdated it's cute, geez]

To Subaru's question and gaze, Emilia sat down onto the couch, averting her eyes as if refraining from joining the conversation, though she was obviously still listening intently. She had been acting like this ever since she realized, too late, how Frederica had tricked her. But that aside,

[Subaru: It's only been two or three days since you returned, right? We left from the village three days ago.....four if you count the traveling time. It seems to be quite a coincidence]

[Frederica: I was surprised too when I returned to the mansion to find it empty. Luckily, there was a letter explaining things in the master's study, so I avoided the worst of the confusion]

[Subar: A letter?]

[Frederica: Yes, from Ram. She was the one who called me back to the mansion, though she was rather haphazard in her communication.... I know it's indulging her too much to pass it off as her personality, but that's how I feel]

Through Frederica's half-awkward smile, Subaru saw the time-worn bond she and Ram must have shared, and all the wonderful days they have passed together. At the same time, erased from her memories, her time spent with Rem must have been just as long.

[Subaru: Could you tell me why Ram called you back?]

[Frederica: I don't completely understand the reason myself. But Miss Emilia was here at the time, I am sure she would know]

At once, both their gazes poured onto Emilia inquisitively. Even now, Emilia continued to maintain her "I'm still really, really angry," attitude, turning her face away. But, as she slowly became unable to resist the attention focused on her, she tried to steal a quick glance in their direction. Only, it ended up being a rather obvious glance.

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, cheer up... or, actually, I'm not the one who upset you this time. Frederica, apologize properly would you?]

[Frederica: I ask for your forgiveness, Miss Emilia. What I did a moment ago was not nice and I apologize. I was so happy we could meet again after so long, my bad side just, slipped out]

[Emilia: ...You won't tease me like that anymore?]

[Frederica: No, I will refrain from doing so. For all the world I will never again tease Miss Emilia in that manner again]

Subaru couldn't quite get rid of the feeling that the wording of Frederica's apology left some room for interpretation. However, our Goddess Emilia seemed to believe in those

words without a second thought, and her up-to-now sulking expression relaxed into one that seemed to say, “I suppose it can’t be helped”.

[Emilia: I understand. I’m not angry anymore. Is that good enough?]

[Frederica: Yes, I am very sorry for before, Miss Emilia. — *Too easy.*]

Somehow, only Subaru heard that last part. He jerked his head to look at Frederica, but she was playing dumb. Emilia, who had no idea she was being considered “too easy,” placed a finger to her cheek and said,

[Emilia: So, let’s see. The reason Frederica was called back to the mansion... umm]

[Subaru: Yeah, yeah. Rushing to call back someone you fired would mean there’s some kind of emergency...actually, I think I might have an idea]

There was indeed an emergency, it was only a few days ago that the Mansion and Arlam village were targeted by the Witch Cult. Considering her skill, which had been able to knock Subaru unconscious in an instant, Frederica must be another shady maid of the Roswaal Mansion with some crazy combat abilities. In short, Ram must have called her back to buff the mansion’s defenses during their state of—

[Emilia: It was because Ram’s aptitude for housework is catastrophic, and the mansion ended up in an unimaginable state of disarray. It was only a few days, but it kept getting harder and harder to live in]

[Subaru: That’s actually a very compelling reason!! She really is all talk and no... wait, Ram knows she’s hopeless, she even said so herself! She’s right about that at least, but then she should have put in some effort to improve!! Right!?!]

Subaru’s chest felt like it would explode from how compelling that reality was compared to his over-guessing of the situation.

Emilia let out a wry smile at his outburst, and shifted her gaze to the living room— or rather, to the entirety of the mansion, as though she could see through its very walls.

[Emilia: But, since Frederica returned, the mansion really has become quite tidy. I think Ram made the right decision in leaving it to someone capable, rather than make things worse by ignoring it]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, I don't think you meant it, but that statement's like a slap to the face!
And, well, I still don't think that's a good enough reason for her to give up so easily]

[Frederica: Putting Ram's assessment aside for the moment, it has been such a long time since I have been given the opportunity to do some really worthwhile work. Luckily, since no one was around, I was able to spend the time on further cleaning the mansion]

Listening to Frederica speak of diligently holding up this household, Subaru held his breath, unable to ignore the pain wrenching in his heart.

For this, was the forces of the world compensating for the eradication of Rem's existence by the Authority of "Gluttony".

[Subaru: I guess since Ram can't run the mansion by herself, the obvious solution was to rely on someone else...]

So Ram had contacted Frederica, who had resigned, asking her to return to the mansion. Without Rem, the Roswaal estate couldn't continue to function, and so, Rem's replacement, Frederica, had arrived.

Yet, the only one in the world who knows of this sad truth is Subaru. Ram had only done as necessity demanded, without stopping to think about why she needed Frederica's help all of a sudden, or just how she had managed to take care of the estate until then. That was all there was to it.

But,

[Subaru: Sorry for being serious all of a sudden but... is it a requirement for all the maids of Roswaal's Mansion to be so quirky?]

[Frederica:? Considering who our master is, what's the point of even asking that question?]

[Subaru: That's annoyingly persuasive!]

At this point, all of Subaru's doubts have been answered. Seeing his response, Frederica nodded her head contentedly, and resuming her perfect posture, stared fixedly at Subaru. Then, casually, in a lowered voice,

[Frederica: By the way, the driver of the dragon carriage outside the mansion has been left out there for over an hour now.....is that alright?]

[Subaru: Hmm? Oh, you mean Otto. I see, it's already been an hour..... Well, I don't think it's that big of an issue. I want to hurry and let Patrasche rest in the stable, but you don't need to pay attention to that Otto guy too much...]

[Otto: For a companion who shared a near-death experience together, that is really quite heartless, Natsuki-san! I never thought I was lower in priority than a ground dragon!]

Right on cue, Otto dramatically opened the doors to the living room. His shoulders hunched up angrily, he was glaring at Subaru while disapprovingly breathing through his nostrils. At his entrance, Subaru slowly stood up, shook his head, and sighed.

[Subaru: No, Otto, you're mistaken]

[Otto: How am I mistaken? It's too late to take back your words from a moment ago.....]

[Subaru: It's not that you're lower in priority than a ground dragon. It's that you are much, much lower in priority than a ground dragon]

[Otto: That's twice over! That's even worse!]

Content with Otto's response and foot-stomping, Subaru turned his gaze toward the window. That is, toward the front yard where the dragon carriage pulled by Patrasche was parked.

Otto followed his gaze, and seemed to understand its meaning. With a still somewhat bitter face, he spoke,

[Otto: I've already put Patrasche in the stables. She is a proud and difficult child, but she didn't want to cause Natsuki-san any trouble, so she was quite docile]

[Subaru: Hearing that from you, it makes me doubt your Divine Protection of "Animal Whispering". If she were a woman, Patrasche would have been a total kuudere, even though she'd be soft on the inside. When did this change happen??]

[Otto: How would I know that kind of thing. More importantly.....]

As Subaru was still struggling to understand just what made Patrasche so devoted to him, Otto moved the conversation to the other matter regarding the dragon carriage, that is—

[Otto: What should be done about the girl sleeping in the carriage? I think it's rather pitiful to leave her shut up in there. If you are busy I could carry her to a room.....]

[Subaru: —Don't you lay a finger on Rem]

There was not a hint of malice in Otto's proposal. But his own voice was ice cold... Subaru himself was surprised by the razor sharpness of it, when he saw Otto flinch.

It was almost a whisper, the words were low and dark, a reflection of the viscous heaviness of his mind. It was good that this did not reach the ears of the girls, but still, Subaru was deeply disturbed by the abnormality of the sound that had escaped his throat.

[Subaru:I'll bring her in, so you don't have to do anything. Your back would be screaming if you had to carry around a girl anyway]

[Otto: You know, merchants are always handling heavier goods during their work. We aren't as weak as you seem to think, Natsuki-san]

Subaru tried to cover up his last statement with a quip, and was thankful for Otto's conciliatory reply, which came after a moment of hesitation. He let out a sigh.

No matter what, his reaction was too extreme. Even though it wasn't intentional— Or rather, it was precisely because it was not intentional that it was a problem. His nerves had been on-end, and anyone who even tries to interfere with Rem, regardless of their intentions, seemed to him to be an enemy.

[Subaru: This is not a good pattern.....Damn it, I feel so wretched. Why am I always so.....]

He was supposed to have overcome this, yet here he was immediately stumbling over the first pebble he came across. Why does he never have the strength to stay standing tall? If Rem was here, if Emilia was watching— if both of them were here now with him, surely he would have that unwavering strength.

[Subaru: I brought it upon myself..... No, I forced Rem to pay that price. What a deadbeat I am!]

There should have been a better, more perfect way.

He had believed that he did his uttermost, up to the end of the loop several days ago he deeply believed that. But there must have been an even better, seamless, perfect outcome somewhere. But Subaru had missed his chance to find it, in his complacency, in his cowardice, he compromised into an imperfect future. And Rem's sacrifice was the price.

If he had been more competent, he would have noticed it.

Before evacuating Emilia and Ram from the mansion, the handwritten letter he had given to Crusch's messenger had already turned blank. He had thought that a Witch Cultist accompanying the messenger had switched the letter in a ploy to sow confusion, but that is laughable.

There was no chance the Witch Cult could have been aware of their threat, and how could he have believed that the Witch Cult would use such a roundabout way to plant seeds of distrust between their two forces? More than that, if they went to all this trouble, compared to a blank letter would it not have been more effective to alter the contents?

Then why, why was the handwritten letter blank? If it was not the work of the Witch Cult, then there could only be one answer.

[Subaru: Rem wrote the letter. I was the one who asked it to be delivered, and Crusch was the one who gave it to the messenger, so the reality of it being handed over remained, and only the contents were erased]

That is the Authority of "Gluttony", and the fate of those whose name and memories were eaten. An existence erased from the world, leaving only a complex web of incongruities behind. If you weren't aware of it, you'd never feel the unease, you'd never even realize anything had been missing.

If that was the case, for who, or for what, would have been the purpose of that existence—
-.

Looking deeper into the fact that the letter was blank, properly investigating, fathoming, delving into the truth, perhaps he could have done it.

What Emilia had said then, come to think of it, the letter had arrived on the evening before the final day. At that moment, the contents of the letter were already gone, then Rem would have been attacked before that time. If so, then hardly any time had passed since Subaru and Rem had parted ways. The chances of being able to catch up were minuscule, but at least there was a chance.

Only, Subaru had let that chance slip by. Why it had slipped by, he could no longer tell. Had he really not felt anything was out of place?

Ram, with her sister-complex, Emilia, who was aware they had left Rem with him in the Capital, yet they had not mentioned Rem at all, so why—

[Subaru:—Ah]

He finally realized it.

At that moment, Subaru let out an idiotic cry and brought his hand to his forehead. With wobbly movements he slid over to the wall, and smashed his head as hard as he could against it.

Shock and pain. But once wasn't enough, again, again, and again he repeated.

[Emilia: Wh, Subaru!?!]

At his inexplicable action, the three with him were shocked into speechlessness. But Emilia was first to return to her senses, and called out to him bewilderedly. She gripped his shoulder from behind, turning him around,

[Emilia: What's wrong all of a sudden? It's not like this is the first time you've done something strange, but this is... Oh—, look your forehead has gotten all red!]

[Subaru: The extent of my stupidity, from the bottom of my heart I am amazed, really]

Feeling the coolness of the tips of Emilia's fingers on his forehead, Subaru shook away his head in a trance of self-loathing. Like he said, he could not bear to look at this own foolishness.

Then, suddenly drawing close to Emilia, Subaru fixed his gaze into her's.

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, I have a favor to ask]

[Emilia: Wh, wha—? Hold on, Subaru, your face is close, and your eyes are scaring me.....]

[Subaru: My helpless idiocy... could you please insult me a little?]

[Emilia: Huh?]

Startled, Emilia grew wide-eyed. Seeing rejection in her response, Subaru reached out to place both hands on her shoulders, holding her tightly preventing her from running away, and then brought his face in even closer.

[Subaru: Please. Don't forgive me, just insult me]

[Emilia: Th, that, I can't do that. I don't think you've done wrong or anything.....]

[Subaru: JUST FIND A WAY!]

[Emilia: Even if you ask me that.....]

[Subaru: Please! If you do this for me, I'll offer you my very soul.....!]

[Emilia: Saying something this heavy is only making me more uncomfortable! Geez, I guess I really don't have a choice]

Emilia hesitated agonizingly against Subaru's desperate, perverse plea, but finally she nodded in resignation. She cleared her throat and looked up at Subaru.

[Emilia: Subaru you blockhead!]

[Subaru: Uuu—]

[Emilia: You naughty, hyperactive, stubborn, selfish, rascal, don't know when to give up, get way too cocky jerk!]

[Subaru: Gu..gu..gul...]

[Emilia: No one asked you, yet you only worry about other people, and don't know your limit. You're a softie who supports a hated half-elf. When I am rebuked and feeling depressed, you take my place, and behave rashly, get abused and do reckless things]

[Subaru: gu.....Eh?]

[Emilia: You listen but don't respond properly, a coward who flirts and then runs away. A fool who comes to help someone in trouble, even after they had a huge fight. When things just aren't working out, when you want something you say the right thing it's so unfair. Then, when it's all over, and everyone is running around taking care of the loose ends, you go to sleep by yourself and slack off. Subaru, you dullard!]

[Subaru: Dullard, now there's a word you don't hear much anymore.....You know, Emilia-tan]

He had been expecting a rebuke, but the abuse he received was far from it. The words didn't scratch at his heart and leave ugly scars, instead they were deep and kind, and left their mark on his and Emilia's hearts alike.

At Subaru's call, Emilia kept her gaze pointed up at him, pursing her lips.

[Emilia: What]

[Subaru: How do I say this... is that how you feel about me?]

[Emilia: I know, it's like all my feelings just flew out. Then I sort of went with it and after a while I had no idea what I was saying. ...Subaru, do you think that is how I really feel?]

[Subaru: I wonder. When you get caught up in the moment, are they your true feelings.....I don't know if I could tell]

At the very least, Subaru had experience regretting things he said in the heat of the moment.

Were those long pent up feelings wanting to finally escape her heart, or just the thoughtless emotions of a moment blurted out all of a sudden?

He thought no one could ever answer that question.

[Subaru: Thank you, Emilia-tan]

[Emilia: All I did was say bad things about you. To get thanked for that.....Subaru, you really are abnormal aren't you?]

[Subaru: 'Abnormal', but for Emilia-tan alone. If I hear it from you, then no matter if it's insult, abuse or a traffic safety poem, it will stir up my pleasure senses]

[Emilia: The last one I didn't understand, but it seems like something I really don't need to know so I'll forget I heard it. —So, are you satisfied now?]

She tried to respond while suppressing a giggle, but in the very end, her eyes looked tinged with sorrow.

It was unfair, the raw expression she showed him sometimes, and it was why he couldn't leave her be.

In answer to her gesture, Subaru smiled a broad smile that showed his teeth.

[Subaru: Yeah, I'm fine now. Actually, maybe I'm still not okay. But, if I were to get a kiss from Emilia-tan to break my curse, I should be able to find the courage I need, if only.....]

[Emilia: That's too bad, because the request office has closed for the day]

[Subaru: Damnit! I screwed up! Why am I always.....too late.....ah!]

As if full of regret, Subaru fell to pieces. Seeing this, Emilia let out a wry smile. After spending some time looking wretched, Subaru finally stood up and looked around the room.

[Subaru: That said, I'm afraid there is some business I need to take care of. I feel bad for leaving everyone and Emilia-tan, but I need a little time. I don't think it will take too long but....What's with your face, Otto?]

[Otto: I feel like charging you for reparations after witnessing that ticklish scene, but I'll leave the negotiations on pricing for later...What were you doing!?!]

Otto, forgotten until now, voiced his discontent, to which Subaru crossed his arms and cocked his head in contemplation. Come to think of it, Otto doesn't know about the last person in this mansion he has yet to become acquainted with.

If that's the case, to tell Otto where he was planning on going next, just what words would be proper.

After agonizing over the problem for just a bit, Subaru unfolded his arms and said,

[Subaru: Well, I'm going to go meet a loli with drill curls holed up in a room that smells like mold]

With that, he completely abandoned any responsibility to explain the situation, and left Otto to his state of confusion.



Excerpt from Arc 3 Chapter 71 [The Girl in the Forbidden Library]

This was a scene from a loop that was cut from the Anime, taking place around Episode 22. It is basically 2/3rd of Arc 3 Chapter 71. We included this as a Prelude to Chapter 3 because this conversation has a huge impact on how Subaru confronts Beatrice in Chapter 3.

Only Subaru remembers this, because after being thrown out by Beatrice, Subaru was killed on the way to the Sanctuary, ending that loop and everything that happened in it.

[Subaru: Wha—? This is odd!?!]

Even though Subaru had heroically volunteered to find Beatrice and set out full of bravado... it's not going so well.

Usually, when Subaru wants to call Beatrice to come to dinner, all he has to do is to open the first door he sees and he'd find Beatrice and the Forbidden Library on the other side. One time, he even found her just by opening the door to the dining room.

Beatrice's magic, "Door Crossing" is a Spatial-Transition Dark-Type magic of a level far beyond Subaru's comprehension.

A little girl, and an expert user of Dark Magic, Beatrice uses the doors of the mansion to randomly obscure the Forbidden Library's entrance. Basically, there is only one right choice, and as if to toy with anyone who seeks to find it, the right choice would continually change without warning.

Somehow, Subaru easily breaks this with what he casually calls his "Door Breaking" ability, and it's unclear exactly why the one person who can always find the door in the first attempt just also happens to be someone who utterly can't read the mood.

[Subaru: To suddenly stop working at a time like this, it's a whole new level of disappointment, geez... After bragging like that to Emilia and Ram, if I still can't find you—
— I don't think I can just play cute and charm my way out of it, so please come out, oy...]

He muttered while opening all the doors in the servant's quarter one by one, having already opened all the doors in the central building where he first started, he's wasted quite a lot of time. This is the first time he's had so much difficulty finding Beatrice, and even if he tries to make light of the situation, it still won't stop the sweat from forming on his brows.

.....

No matter what, in an empty mansion opening every single door one after the other only to be disappointed again and again, all this must look pretty pitiful to a bystander.

[Subaru: Damnit, I can't find it! This is bad, I'm running out of time! Should I give up and run off leaving things like this!? My conscience hurts just at the thought of the way Emilia-tan was looking at me with all that faith in her eyes... but maybe I don't have a choice?! I'll just have to tell everyone Beatrice has a serious stomachache and couldn't leave the bathroom——]

[——You can't think of any better excuses I suppose, you jerk!?!]

As Subaru tore at his head, bemoaning his situation, he was met by the abrupt retort the moment he opened the door.

Before his eyes, the room that was supposed to be the bathroom was instead piled with the kind of paper used for something other than wiping one's butt— In short, it was replaced by a library stuffed full of books. The Forbidden Library, a sight he had grown so used to seeing, yet one he hadn't seen for a long time. Its guardian, a little girl wearing an extravagant dress, sat in front of him as always.

Entering the room, there was a wooden stepladder straight in front of him, and seated on top of it was a girl with a thick book open in her lap.

[Subaru: Beako, found you in the bathroom safe and sound— My instincts aren't half bad if I don't say so myself]

[Beatrice: It's only that I took pity on you, since you won't give up I suppose. And for the sake of Betty's good name, it would be troublesome if you started telling people something strange]

[Subaru: Don't worry about it! Everyone poops, and in an emergency with an upset stomach, not many people would want to respond when they're called. But I shouldn't be saying something so insensitive when you're here straining yourself, sorry!]

[Beatrice: What you just said is already the most insensitive thing in the world I suppose!]
Standing up from her stool, Beatrice was huffing with outright indignation. Watching her curls thrashing about wildly, Subaru tried to calm her by saying [My bad, my bad], and waving his hands lightly.

[Subaru: Putting that aside, it's been a while. I was looking all over the mansion for you, it's like you wouldn't open up to me at all]

[Beatrice:That is how the Door Crossing is supposed to work when I'm paying attention. Even you, if I really tried, you would not be able to enter I suppose]

[Subaru: The fact that you let me in here makes that hard to believe! Tsundere!]

[Beatrice: If I didn't let you in, you'd have gone around threatening me with that scandal!]
After shouting angrily, Beatrice seemed embarrassed by her outburst and wore an awkward expression on her face. Seeing her change in attitude, the corner of Subaru's mouth relaxed a little as he walked up to where she was sitting.

[Subaru: That aside, I'm glad I was able to find you. I'm sorry this is so sudden, but could you get ready to leave? It'll be problematic if you stayed here]

[Beatrice: Betty won't be leaving]

[Subaru: Hah?]

At those abrupt words rejecting his suggestion, Subaru stopped in his steps.

He looked at her, and, looking back at him, she sighed at his dumbfounded expression.

[Beatrice: 'Betty won't be leaving,' that's what I said. I have no intention of leaving the Forbidden Library, or the mansion for that matter I suppose. It would be best if you accept that, and just leave]

[Subaru: Wait a second, you just don't understand the situation right now. You can't stay here, it's too dangerous, so let's go together. I'll tell you everything!]

[Beatrice: Even without you explaining it, I already understand the gist of it I suppose. Also, stop treating me like a child]

Glaring at Subaru, Beatrice reached out towards one of the bookshelves, taking down a book too large for her hands that looked like an illustrated encyclopedia. She returned to her step ladder hugging the book to her chest as she always did, then, she sat down with the book open in her lap as though nothing had changed, as though she really had no intention of leaving.

[Subaru: Oy, come on, don't end the conversation like that, shutting me out all of a sudden]

[Beatrice: There's nothing left for Betty to say I suppose. You are just one-sidedly wanting to continue, and even if you do, my answer won't change. Like me, you have no time to waste either I suppose?]

[Subaru: Guu.....If you know that much, then help me out. I'm taking you with me. You're coming with me. Okay?]

[Beatrice: No thanks. It's the same no matter who comes. —Yes, no matter who it is, I won't let them set one foot inside the Forbidden Library I suppose]

Her eyes dropping down to her book, Beatrice's quiet reply was strong and firm.

Scratching his head at her stubbornness, Subaru let out a sigh,

[Subaru: Look, I didn't come here this time just to make a fuss, or because Ram has dinner ready. I don't want to say it, but the Witch Cult is coming. They don't discriminate in who they attack, and if I leave you here in the mansion.....]

[Beatrice: You should be well acquainted with the power of my Door Crossing ability. And even if anyone dares set foot in here.....I won't show them any mercy I suppose]

[Subaru: ——!]

For a moment, Subaru felt the dangerous presence pouring out of Beatrice as she said those words. An icy shiver ran up his back. Sucking in a sharp breath, he realized these were the aftershocks of the waves of magic radiating from her entire body.

The enormity of the Mana flow was such that even Subaru, who has very little experience with magic, could tell how overwhelming it was.

[Subaru: ——! Even so, I am taking you with me]

[Beatrice: That again.....]

[Subaru: Whether you are strong or not, it has nothing to do with that! You're a girl, you're little, that's reason enough! I don't want to leave you here where it's dangerous, do I need any other reason?!]

Even being pressured by the might of her aura, Subaru planted his feet firmly on the floor, shouting.

Seeing the man in front of her arguing even more vehemently, Beatrice's eyes opened wide with astonishment. Then, as though enduring something painful, she closed them again.

Subaru furrowed his brows at her response, but still pushed forward intent on taking her with him. Just then,

[Beatrice: Betty, can't go with you. Please, don't confuse things anymore]

[Subaru: I'm not mistaken. You are. —That's all I have to say]

[Beatrice: You're stubborn I suppose. —You know, I hate stubbornness]

Beatrice murmured something in a whisper. Uncertain what she said, Subaru was about to ask, but before he could, Beatrice stood up from her stool.

[Beatrice: I see, I suppose, you win. I'll do as you asked, I suppose]

[Subaru: Oh? O-oh, that's good. You understood, that good. For a moment, after you stood up, I was getting ready to get blown out of here flying you know]

[Beatrice: For Betty, blasting you away so only your shadow remains in this world would be too easy.....but I won't do something so cruel as that]

Saying something so frightening as though it were nothing, Beatrice returned the book she had taken back into its shelf. Curious at her movements, Subaru realized something and raised his brows. Perhaps it was because she had agreed to go with him that he let his guard down. On a whim, he asked,

[Subaru: By the way, there are tons of books in here, but are you familiar with any languages other than the Yi Ro Ha systems?]

[Beatrice: I was wondering what you would ask all of a sudden.....By Yi-Ro-Ha I suppose you mean the alphabets like Yi and the others? Using an expression like that, it is bound to anger the professional linguists]

[Subaru: Yeah yeah, my bad my bad, sorry. But, getting down to business.....]

Giving Beatrice, who was glaring sharply at him, a nervous smile, Subaru pulled a single book out of his jacket. The book was bound all in black, and its contents——

[Subaru: Well it's this thing, but all the letters inside are nothing I've ever seen before. I was wondering if you might know.....]

[Beatrice: ——I should like to know, why you are holding that right now I suppose]

Suddenly, her rigid voice overpowered Subaru's words, cutting him off. Looking at her, Beatrice's eyes were stretched wide, staring fixedly at the "Gospel" in his hands.

Subaru was surprised by the intensity of her reaction, having only brought up the subject casually.

[Beatrice: I would like to know why you are holding that right now I suppose. Answer me]

[Subaru: Even if this is trash... I took it from that idiot from the Witch Cult. He was treating it with some crazy religious zeal, so I thought it might have some clues written in it]

[Beatrice: Took it? From the Witch Cult? You, of all people.....]

Putting a hand to her forehead, slightly swaying back and forth, Beatrice's expression changed. The blood drained from her already pale complexion, Subaru was disconcerted by the way her eyes swam, unfocused.

She seemed as if about to fall over at any moment, so without thinking, Subaru reached out a hand to steady her.

[Subaru: Oy, oy oy, are you okay? If you aren't feeling well, don't push yourself]

[Beatrice: Betty is....it's no good, if that's how things are. But, leaving it in his care.....It's unthinkable, but maybe Roswaal has been, until now.....?]

[Subaru: Hel—lo—? Sorry to interrupt you when you are looking so serious, but can—you—hear—me—?]

[Beatrice: I am only thinking right now I suppose, so you can just wait for a moment]

Beatrice silenced the worried Subaru with a sharp look, and he calmed down quietly. He closed his mouth as he watched Beatrice shut her eyes, changing her expression.

After some time had passed, and she seemed to remain unresponsive, Subaru opened the Gospel in his hands for the first time in a while, flipping through the pages he still couldn't understand.

Then, he suddenly noticed it.

[Subaru: This book, the latter half is all blank. ... But, was this page here before?]

It was written in an unknown alphabet, and the second half was missing pages that seemed to have been ripped out. These two facts hadn't changed. Only, the last page to have writing on it seemed to have had words added to it.

Though he couldn't read it anyway. Perhaps he was just imagining it, there was no reason to worry about it that much.

[Beatrice: —That book, what do you plan to do with it I suppose?]

Beatrice, who had been silent for a long time, asked all of a sudden.

Resting her hand against her lips, as if reaching some conclusion to her own mind, Beatrice threw this question at Subaru. [Even if you ask me.....] Subaru responded, affected by her demeanor,

[Subaru: Decipher the contents.....though I'm not interested in the teachings of the Witch Cult or anything, it's just in case there is any kind of useful information here. Otherwise, I wouldn't want to be carrying around a book that creepy guy cared so much for]

[Beatrice:At the very least, Betty can't read what's in there. However, if you don't want to hold on to it, you could entrust its care to me I suppose]

[Subaru: Entrust it?]

[Beatrice: It is a strange book that was once cherished by a strange owner I suppose. If you have any reservations about carrying around a book like that, I could take it off your hands for you]

Beatrice reached out timidly towards him.

From that gesture, he could tell, at the very least, that this wasn't a book she longed to have. These were not the words someone would use if they were planning on reselling it for a tidy profit.

They were words filled with good intentions. That, and from the way she had been acting, she obviously understood the book was undoubtedly a Gospel. Thus,

[Subaru: Sorry, but I have to reject your offer]

Subaru said, gently pushing Beatrice's extended hand down.

At his words, Beatrice's eyes flickered for only a moment, before her lovely face turned into something stern and heavy.

[Beatrice: Why, I suppose. You instinctively know what an evil thing that is, don't you? At the very least, you realize that it's not something good to be fascinated with I suppose. In that case, rather than hold it yourself, Betty.....]

[Subaru: I'm like an evil imp that doesn't want to give something away even if someone wants it so badly, and even if I've no use for it. ... I guess that's my stance. Really, that's it]

This book, called a Gospel, seemed to hold a high significance for the disciples of the Witch Cult. Even more, its owner was Betelgeuse, quite a high ranking member of the Witch Cult. Memories of how attached that man was to this book were still fresh in his mind. Even though he had already been captured and debilitated, Subaru was still wary.

[Subaru: It's a book some scary old man might come drooling over to get back. There's no excuse for a guy to give something like that to a little girl just because it's creepy to hold onto]

[Beatrice: ——!]

[Subaru: If it's dangerous then I'll hang onto it. After all, I'm here to get you to someplace safe you know? Putting you in danger on purpose would be flipping that on its head. Don't treat me like I'm a cold-hearted guy, come on]

Lightly smiling, Subaru placed the book back into his clothes, hiding it from Beatrice's view. He had no idea what was going through her mind as she saw that.

She blinked just once, her lips parting as if to speak.

[Beatrice: ——]

But unable to say anything, her mouth closed again, and she turned her face away.

There was something unnatural in her response, but her expression prevented him from asking about it. Instead, he cracked his neck, and proceeded to change the topic.

[Subaru: Ah, well it's no big deal. For now, since we decided to move I'll leave the preparations to you. Don't bring anything too big, but two or three important books shouldn't be a problem. Maybe two or three sets of clothes as well...]

[Beatrice:The library will follow Betty wherever I go. More importantly, you have convinced the other two already I suppose?]

[Subaru: I just heard something really convenient! Yeah, I convinced them alright. You're the only one left. We're all going to evacuate to the Sanctuary, where Roswaal is]

[Beatrice: Roswaal, I suppose... Subaru, what happened to the maid's younger sister that went with you?]

Unexpectedly, Beatrice changed the topic to Rem.

Hearing her suddenly talk about Rem was surprising, and Subaru couldn't help lifting his brows, looking slightly astonished. Realizing this probably wasn't the best response, he tried to relax his expression, saying,

[Subaru: If you're talking about Rem, she's taking care of things in the capital at the moment. We caught this giant fish on the way here, kind of. It was so big, that she had to go back to prepare a really luxurious feast. Once this is all settled, let's all go over there and stuff ourselves]

[Beatrice: You look really happy when you talk about her you know. —Did anything happen?]

[Subaru: Erm]

Hearing Rem's name, Subaru overreacted a little. He couldn't deny that he was talking faster than usual. Beatrice's remark had hit the nail on the head, and Subaru turned his gaze away, whistling nonchalantly.

[Subaru: No, n-nothing happened really]

[Beatrice: Being attended to so tenderly, it would be more strange if no feelings emerged I suppose. Betty won't say anything about it, so you can do as you like]

[Subaru: I, I'm not trying to hide anything you know? Only, it's gonna take a lot of courage to face Emilia-tan and her sister about this so soon.....so I guess I'm in kind of a tactical retreat]

Fumbling for words, Subaru pressed his index fingers together and, embarrassed, turned his back to Beatrice with his head sunk down.

It was what it was, and there was truth in Subaru needing courage to bring it up. Surely Emilia wouldn't want to hear him say, all of a sudden, "I will have both you and Rem!" It would be like pouring water in her ears. Though this was his overall plan in the end.

[Subaru: It's a good thing to raise the goal to work towards. That way motivation and effort comes more easily. I don't dislike hard work, you know. Only I haven't really had a plan for the future until now——!]

His excuses puffing him up higher and higher, carried away by his emotions, he was suddenly stopped by an unexpected sensation.

He felt a warmth against his back, followed by arms wrapping around his waist, holding him tightly. They were small, thin arms, and he knew immediately whose they were. Beatrice.

[Subaru: Oh, it's only Beako. Startled me there. Don't surprise me like that all of a sudden, come on...]

[Beatrice: That response really irritates me I suppose. ——But, it's enough]

[Subaru: Huh?]

Just as he tilted his head at her unexpected words, a sudden bright light blinded him.

Before he realized it, the door opened all on its own,

[Beatrice: Farewell——]

[Subaru: Huh, wh—!?!]

The arms that had been holding him let go, and he was pushed forward by an immense pressure from behind. Unable to resist, he began falling forward, sliding towards the door. This way, as if being sucked through, he flew toward the door—

[Subaru: Beatrice——!]

[Beatrice: Betty.....can't go with you]

Twisting himself around, Subaru looked back into the room just before he was swept through the door. The form of the girl caught in his field of view, had large droplets of tears emerging in her eyes.

[Subaru: ———!]

Unable to form any words, his vision twisted. Caught in the shifting spatial dimensions, his body moved down a path that shouldn't exist as the link to the Forbidden Library began to fade.

Just like that, Subaru's body was flung from the space of the Forbidden Library, disappearing some place far away.

[Beatrice: ——other]

Watching this unfold, Beatrice shut the door that had been left open.

There was a sound of space ripping apart, followed by the deep silence that descended once again upon the Forbidden Library.

[Beatrice: ——Mother]

In a small voice, as though about to cry, Beatrice called to that name. The large droplets of tears had already disappeared from her eyes, though her expression remained.

[Beatrice: Just..... how much more..... must Betty.....]

About to break down crying, Beatrice walked back to her stepladder, laying down all her weight onto it. She reached out her arm behind the ladder—— from a shelf that was usually behind her, she took down a book, and hugged it close.

[Beatrice: Mother...Mother.....Mother.....!]

Like a child, lost, clinging tightly to the book pressed against her chest, Beatrice's quiet cries resounded through the Forbidden Library.

The book in her embrace, bound all in black, never responded.

Chapter 3 [Reunion and Passing]

——Slowly, focusing only on turning the doorknob in his hand, Subaru held his breath.

He had a feeling this was the one.

Quietly wandering through the mansion like this, he'd all of a sudden notice a door that particularly draws his attention.

Leaving Emilia and the others behind in the living room, having been granted a little bit of time, Subaru wandered through the mansion alone, and found it just as he set foot into the hallway on the second floor.

The moment he touched the doorknob, his suspicion turned into conviction, and as he started to push it open, there was not a single doubt in his mind.

And, taking in the existence of “that room”, in that place, at that very moment, he stepped inside,

[Subaru: Hey, it's been a while]

The Forbidden Library, just as he remembered it, stretched out in front of his eyes.

The little girl, who is the master of that dimly lit room, hadn't changed a bit either——

Sitting on a stepladder like it's a makeshift chair, she was in the middle of leafing through a book.

[Beatrice: ——The mansion was noisy today, I figured you returned I suppose]

Her eyes lifted for a moment to take Subaru into her gaze. ——However, after muttering as if she was bored, she immediately lost interest, and dropped her eyes back into her book.

[Beatrice: If you're back, that means Nii-cha must be back as well. I sense that girl, and a few other annoying insects as well I suppose]

[Subaru: Puck hasn't shown up yet, he's recharging his batteries I think. Ah, I don't like how you talk about Emilia-tan like she's in the same category you know! Though I don't mind the part about Otto]

[Beatrice: You're really noisy]

Beatrice huffed her nose at Subaru's smalltalk, and rearranged her legs under her extravagant dress. Seeing that, Subaru continued to walk closer, stringing words together as he did so.

[Subaru: But it sure has been a long time since I saw you. Since that time with Bete... Ah, wait, that didn't happen... the last time was before I left for the Capital wasn't it? It's about ten days now...]

[Beatrice: Not long at all I suppose. While Betty is in this room, the flow of time outside really doesn't matter that much]

[Subaru: And there you are saying strange things again, geez. Also, when you're talking with someone, you really shouldn't have your nose buried in a book you know! Seeing me again after ten days, I'd understand if you're so happy that you want to hide your blush but still...]

[Beatrice: I can make your mouth spit blood instead of noise until you turn pale in the face, you know]

At the girl's unhidden annoyance, Subaru loosened the tension in his face.

Whenever he comes to talk with the girl guarding the Forbidden Library, Subaru couldn't help but want to do things to poke at her stubborn attitude and mess up that deadpan expression of hers.

Cracking jokes and clowning around, annoying her until she gets really pissed off, then keep prodding her until she finally couldn't stand it anymore and throws him out.

There is a part of himself that thoroughly enjoys these exchanges. But just why does he always have this feeling towards her, he isn't quite sure if he knows.

[Beatrice: I take the fact that you've returned as a sign that the recent disturbances around here have settled, I suppose]

[Subaru: You noticed..... Well that's only natural I guess. Emilia and Ram ran around all over the mansion looking for you, you know? It would be nice to apologize to them later]

[Beatrice: Betty? Apologize? To whom, and for what, I can't imagine why I should do such a thing]

Huffing with her perfectly formed nose, Beatrice closed her book with a loud clap, and rose from her seat on the stepladder. Then, putting the thickly bound book back onto its shelf, on tip-toes, she stretched as hard as she could to reach for the one right next to it. Seeing she was having trouble getting it out, Subaru walked up beside her.

[Subaru: This one? Here]

[Beatrice:No, it's the one next to it I suppose. If you're trying to give help that people haven't asked for, at least try to help them correctly]

[Subaru: Such a thankful loli... Oy, careful not to drop it. You will get hurt if this brick falls on your toes]

As Subaru was pulling out the book with one hand, he found it surprisingly heavy. Once he had carefully handed it over to her, Beatrice accepted it, hugging it to her chest. Subaru briefly tried to read the title, but as someone who could barely understand anything beyond the "Yi" alphabets, it was too far beyond Subaru's ability to comprehend.

[Beatrice: I don't think I will thank you I suppose]

[Subaru: I know you're trying to follow the tsundere path and all, but frankly, you saying that and you just straight up saying "Thank you" pretty much carry the same meaning at this point]

At least, the fact that she'd acknowledge that his actions would be generally considered worthy of thanks, was in itself a testament to her good will.

In response to Subaru's retort, Beatrice frowned and turned her face to the side. Seeing her obstinate attitude, Subaru scratched his head,

[Subaru: I don't mind if you never thank me until the end of time, but make sure to at least thank those two, ok? They were really worried, leaving you behind in the mansion]

[Beatrice: It's not like I ever asked them to...]

[Subaru: Don't say something lame like that. Most people never asked to be born but are born anyway, and even if you don't want people to worry about you they will still worry.

.....And that second part is only true when you have kind hearted people around you]

There was no need to specify that Emilia and Ram were that kind of people. Emilia's everyday way of life pretty much gives her a good-person score of 100 out of 100,

although Ram's score would probably go into negative numbers, how she is on the inside is a different matter.

Regardless, Beatrice didn't show any sign of agreeing with him. Instead, turning away, she bit her lip slightly and said,

[Beatrice: But in the end, they still left the mansion I suppose..... without Betty]

[Subaru: What do you mean? Are you trying to say you didn't want to be left behind? You cut yourself off with that Hikikomori Door spell, far away, would it have been too troublesome to come out yourself?]

[Beatrice: It's "Door Crossing". Don't change it to a ridiculous name like that I suppose. Besides, such a suggestion is insulting to Betty]

Without acknowledging Subaru's words, Beatrice continued facing to the side, her obstinate attitude unbroken. He sensed this time there was something different, and dangerous, beyond her usual act. Subaru furrowed his brows and didn't know what to do. With her acting like this even before they'd started talking about what he had actually come here to ask her, he wondered how he could bring it up now. Even so, perhaps he still had one more trick up his sleeve to lift up her mood.....

[Subaru: Oh well. If you're going to be that stubborn, I'll just tell Emilia-tan that you wouldn't stop repeating "thank you" with tears of gratitude streaming from your eyes]

[Beatrice: You shouldn't make up lies?! It's been a very long time since I last shed a tear I suppose]

[Subaru: What, you're saying you're too embarrassed to cry? If you say that kind of thing while you're still a kid, you're gonna find it hard to express your emotions when you grow up you know? Kids shouldn't worry about what other people think and just cry when they're sad]

[Beatrice: I have some reservations listening to this coming from a man who cried his heart out on the lap of the woman he likes]

[Subaru: Can't you please forget about that!?!]

Perhaps Emilia herself knew not to remind Subaru of this embarrassing history.

He was acting like an idiot to distract himself from the dread he carried deep inside his heart, unconsciously building up an increasingly unsustainable dam.

Lying on Emilia's lap, all this collapsed, and all the emotions he had been bottling up ever since first being summoned to this world came rushing out in a flood of tears.

Reminded of that time again, his face felt like it was about to burst into flame. Although, along with that heat, deep within his heart he also felt a radiant light shining from that memory.

Scratching at his cheek, while trying to redo the seal on that particular memory, Subaru snuck a quick glance at Beatrice. Looking bored as always, she had sat back down on the stepladder with the book Subaru had retrieved for her. She had just slowly started letting her eyes run over its contents.

She was clearly trying to shut off any further conversation, but if he were to let her do that, there would be no meaning in him coming here in the first place.

[Subaru: Anyway, putting crying or not aside..... I have something I want to ask you, is that ok?]

[Beatrice: You're free to ask I suppose]

Within her reply, accompanied by the sound of a page turning over in her book, there was the unspoken message "whether I answer or not is another story". There was no indication of cooperation from her, but at least she gave him permission to ask. Subaru quietly mumbled [alright then] under his breath and, intending to breach the subject of his visit—
—.

[Subaru: —Come to think of it, considering all that commotion was going on outside, wasn't your reaction kind of lacking?]

However, what came out of his mouth didn't carry the meaning he had intended, and instead only served to reignite the conversation he had just tried to close off.

Hearing Subaru's words, Beatrice raised her eyes from her book. Sensing his reflection within her clear, immaculate gaze, Subaru sucked in a small breath,

[Subaru: Wh... while you were sitting in here acting like nothing was happening, it was getting pretty crazy outside you know? This strange group of guys had the mansion surrounded, and.....]

[Beatrice: Stop it]

[Subaru: If I hadn't somehow managed to bring back reinforcements with me from the Capital, you have no idea what would have happened. And, it's not like it was easy for me to make my way back here.....]

[Beatrice: I really want you to stop now I suppose]

[Subaru: It was actually a journey so rough, if I were to tell it to you, both you and I would be in tears by the end, but having finally cleared that hurdle.....!]

With a loud, cracking noise, Subaru's rant was forcibly cut off.

Looking around, the source of the sound was the book Beatrice had been holding in her hands which she had slammed shut with all her strength. Subaru tried to understand Beatrice's expression, and her intentions, but she turned to face him with a sharp and merciless glare, and said,

[Beatrice: How about you say what you actually came here to say, you spineless coward]

[Subaru:yeah]

He couldn't deny it.

She was right, and had clearly seen through his attempt to run away. To run away from the answer to the question he knew he had to ask.

[Subaru: Do you...]

Gulping down his breath, he squeezed shut his eyes, listening to the beating of his heart. Beyond his closed eyelids, he saw her sweet smile, smiling back at him.

[Subaru: Do you... remember Rem?]

—His question became sound and, having exploded into reality, could no longer be taken back.

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In the loops after the slaying of the White Whale, Subaru had only spoken to Beatrice once in the Forbidden Library.

The purpose of that conversation was to convince her to escape from the Witch Cult, but she refused, and in the end, the girl was left in the mansion all alone.

While he could no longer remember everything they had discussed, looking back, there was one fact that he could not miss.

Beatrice, at that point in time, had asked him about Rem, who was supposed to have returned with him.

By that time, the handwritten letter had already turned blank when it reached the Mansion.

In other words, the conversation took place after Rem had been attacked by the Sin Archbishops, and Beatrice, who had never seemed to care much about Rem up to that point, had suddenly asked about her——

[Subaru: Answer me. Do you remember Rem who used to live in this mansion?]

He wanted her to remember, she must remember, thinking this, Subaru's voice distorted toward the end.

The depths of his memories confirmed this, and his ever weakening heart, so close to sinking, to drowning, yearning to be revived, would not deny this...

Beatrice silently stared at Subaru.

Within her pupils, there was neither feeling nor emotion. What she was thinking was impossible to read.

Normally, she was a girl whose emotions are easy to understand, but at this moment, Subaru could not pick up anything at all. His teeth itched, it was as if time stood still, and Subaru's heart was burning down to ashes.

[Subaru: Hey.....]

Why don't you say anything.

You either remember, or you don't, it's not a difficult question to answer...

...Of course, there was only one answer he wanted to hear. That Beatrice remembers Rem, and that she would laugh at the sheer stupidity of his question.

Memories eaten, name swallowed, removed from the world, what a stupid notion that is.

Let her feel as he feels, let her feel that same indignation at the cruel outrageousness of this World. Or, even if they could just share the common reality of her existence, perhaps they would find the solution together, and that would be enough.

So, tell me you know her.

Like Emilia, like Crusch, like Wilhelm, like all the others, Rem—— don't tell me you have forgotten her.

Wanting to hear her answer. Dreading to hear her answer. Agitation, contradiction, his emotions wrenched and twisted.

Then, to Subaru's faltering, convulsing heart, Beatrice spoke

[Beatrice: ——I don't want to answer]

She turned her gaze away from Subaru, answering neither yes or no.

Losing his breath with a "Ha", for an instant, Subaru's mind stopped. Then bewilderedly flinging his arms in the air

[Subaru: Wa, wait. What do you mean you don't want to answer? Doesn't that question only have the answers YES or NO?]

[Beatrice: I don't know what you mean by '/yes/' or '/nō/' I suppose. And my answer will never change. I don't want to answer]

[Subaru: I'M SAYING THAT ISN'T AN ANSWER!]

Swinging his arms down, Subaru stepped forward furiously.

The girl sitting on the stepladder did not even glance at his intense gesture, and only firmly closed her lips. Seeing her obstinate attitude, flames engulfed his chest, impossible to stop.

[Subaru: Those are not the words I want to hear from you!]

[Beatrice: Why does Betty have to answer in words you want to hear I suppose?Stop making a fuss. The Library will get disordered I suppose]

[Subaru: You.....!]

Subaru stormed toward Beatrice.

The face that did not even want to look at him, Subaru wanted to force it around and ask her face to face how could she say something so heartless. But,

[Subaru:————]

The moment he was about to touch her, Beatrice looked at Subaru.

And then, in that instant, her eyes filled with waves of emotion, Subaru's hand stopped.

Because it was as if she——

[Beatrice: That question of yours, are words querying about someone eaten by 'Gluttony']

[Subaru: ——! So, you.....]

[Beatrice: This sort of thing, if one is familiar with the Authority of Gluttony, is not difficult to deduce I suppose. Roswaal too, and Nii-cha, and Shaula would all know this as well]

[Subaru: Ros...!?!]

An unexpected name flying out, Subaru's throat clogged up.

Roswaal knowing the Authority of Gluttony —— does that mean there might be a chance that he remembers Rem? No but before that,

[Subaru: How much do you guys know about the Witch's Cult? Even Roswaal should have known, that once Emilia's identity as a Half-Elf was known to the public, the Witch Cult would start taking action. Yet, if I didn't do anything, the Mansion and the village would all have been destroyed. What is going on?]

[Beatrice:]

[Subaru: There is no way he didn't plan anything, that was what Rem and Crusch-san told me. Yet, it looks to me like he didn't prepare for anything at all, because if he did, how could it have end up so catastrophically...]

[Beatrice: Betty doesn't know how much Roswaal has thought about it I suppose. But..... I don't think Roswaal would have thought nothing on it]

Listening to Beatrice's statement, Subaru narrowed his brows, trying to pick out some indication of Roswaal's preparations at work during the battle against Betelgeuse. Yet, no matter how much Subaru searched through his memories, he couldn't find anything of the sort.

[Subaru: Is it a misconception? Or are we overestimating his capabilities? If Roswaal did something, then why was I faced with so much trouble.....]

[Beatrice: If you don't know, then no one could possibly know]

Her sigh carried a color of disappointment, Beatrice seemed to have given up on his lack of understanding. Even though he was displeased by her attitude, Subaru noticed the conversation had strayed off the topic.

[Subaru: Wait, compared to that, if you know something about the Witch Cult, tell me everything. About the Sin Archbishops, about 'Gluttony', there's a mountain of things I want to ask you..... and this too]

One after another, Subaru wanted to ask Beatrice everything.

Subaru put his hand into his jacket, and took out a book with black binding.

The book, dirtied with black-ish blood on the cover and partially on the inside, was the loot he received after a fierce battle against a formidable opponent, several days ago.

[Subaru: I know this thing is a really important and deep part of the Witch Cult... I can't read what's inside, but as the guardian of the Forbidden Library you might know something.....]

[Beatrice: ——A Gospel]

Looking at the book in Subaru's hands, Beatrice's eyes opened wide.

Her peach-colored lips trembled, staring at the Gospel with a frozen gaze.

The illegible words written on the cover — she skimmed over them, and with an incredulous expression,

[Beatrice: Why do you, of all people, have.....]

[Subaru: I plundered it, but it's not that I actually wanted it, you know. Like I said, the Witch Cult had the mansion surrounded. So I took it off of their leader. The owner..... doesn't exist in this world anymore]

[Beatrice: Took it.....but, that]

Beatrice's voice quivered, as she reached out her hands for the Gospel held by Subaru.

Though he hesitated, seeing Beatrice's small fingers trembling, Subaru slowly placed the Gospel in her hands. Receiving the book, as if checking, she traced her finger over the mysterious letters on the front cover, and

[Beatrice: Its owner..... died, you said, I suppose?]

[Subaru:Yeah. He's dead. He got engulfed by the carriage wheels and I killed him]

All things considered, Betelgeuse wasn't directly killed by Subaru.

But still, everything from the reason, the circumstances, to the events leading up to the reality of his demise, were all inevitable extensions of Subaru's actions.

Subaru wanted to kill Betelgeuse, for if he didn't take that man's life in a duel to the death, in his Soul, he would never be able to forgive himself.

Therefore, Subaru had no reservations about his intention to murder Betelgeuse.

But even without reservations, it could not be said that dirtying his hands did not leave him with any regrets. He could not pretend it didn't affect him, nor would his heart lie for him on this matter.

The fact that he killed Betelgeuse, and had once been killed by Betelgeuse as well, he will never be able to forget.

For as long as he lives, he will be carrying the life he took from that man—but these sentiments did not come out of Subaru's mouth.

Betelgeuse was an existence that deserved to die, and Subaru, believing this, murdered him.

That's all.

But, to all these thoughts carried within his words, Beatrice did not show any reaction.

She only quietly murmured [I see.....], keeping her eyes dropped down at the Gospel in her hands,

[Beatrice: So even you went leaving Betty, huh, Juice.....]

[Subaru: ——? Who is that?]

[Beatrice: There is no need for you to know. What happened to the 'Witch Gene', if you have killed 'Sloth' I suppose?]

[Subaru: Witch, gene.....?]

At Beatrice's question, Subaru wrinkled his brows and tilted his head.

Seeing this gesture from Subaru, Beatrice's expression was one of bafflement, and she narrowed her eyes as if trying to read Subaru's emotions from his expression. But, searching, her gaze could not find what it was looking for.

Subaru clicked his tongue in agitation,

[Subaru: Tch, don't use professional terminologies on a guy who doesn't know anything about the situation, come on. What is that, 'Witch Gene'? Ugh sounds wonderful already]

[Beatrice: You don't know.....? Wait, seriously? Then, for what reason did you kill 'Sloth' I suppose? I don't understand]

[Subaru: I was just getting rid of falling sparks! What are you trying to tell me!]

The conversation that just doesn't seem to mesh is straining Subaru's patience, but unlike Subaru, who was trying to force the pace, Beatrice is getting closer and closer to a complete silence. Placing the back of her hand against her lips, as if in deep thought, she only continued gazing at the front cover of the book,

[Beatrice: I, don't know.This is beyond Betty's ability to decide]

[Subaru: What are you trying to decide alone ——hey]

Shaking her head, Beatrice threw the Gospel at Subaru.

Quickly catching the thrown book, Subaru breathed a small sigh of relief and,

[Subaru: What are you doing all of a sudden. I'm not saying it's dangerous, but it is still an eerie book. Handle it more carefully!]

[Beatrice: ——You should hold onto it, I suppose. What would the Witch Gene choose, or not choose... Either way, a decision will be forced. When that time comes, if it helps you in your decision, Juice would be able to pass on peacefully too, I suppose]

[Subaru: What do you mean a beverage passing on! You're.....!]

Nothing at all, Subaru understood none of it as he clung to the incomprehensible words.

But, before Subaru could say anything, there was a strange feeling forming behind him.

——There was the sound of space being bent by an unnatural force. Subaru instinctively understood, though he didn't know why he knew this,

[Subaru: Are you going to kick me out? I haven't been able ask you anything yet..... You want me to leave with just this, seriously!?!]

[Beatrice: The answers you want to hear, and the words you want to hear — why must Betty say them I suppose? Selfish..... Stop being Proudful]

[Subaru: Pri.....! —Just tell me, I want to know! I won't ask for any more! So, please...]

[Beatrice: —Betty is...]

All the hair of his back stood on end — for they were being physically drawn backwards by a force pulling Subaru's entire body back.

Space was distorting — only when he turned his head to look behind him, he saw that the door which was supposed to be shut, had been opened, and he knew that the space of absolute darkness shall soon engulf him.

No wind was blowing, nor were his legs or arms being grabbed by anything.

Only, there was an indescribable pressure all over his body from the front, and a gravitational force invisible to naked eyes from the rear, as if embracing him, pulling him away.

—Absolute and forceful, it was the true form of Door Crossing.

[Subaru: Beako..... Beatrice!]

[Beatrice: What is trying to get out is your body, and your soul]

[Subaru: What are you—]

[Beatrice: Your heart doesn't want to hear the true answers, because of your weakness your gaze avoids reality, and your selfish mind does not want to look at your own Sins. All this, distances your body further from this Forbidden Library]

But,

[Subaru: I—]

[Beatrice: Betty is not... a convenient tool for you]

[Subaru: —!?!]

[Beatrice: What you want to hear, when you want to hear it, in words you want to hear, in the way you want to hear it..... I am not a convenient existence, like that]

As these words wrenched through Beatrice's lips, Subaru could not pronounce another syllable.

They penetrated deep, and pierced the mark, and completely unprepared, Subaru was mauled by those word into speechless astonishment.

Then, as void emerged, Subaru's body's resistance collapsed, and

[Subaru: Cra——]

This way, as if being sucked into the door behind him, Subaru's body was pulled toward the Door Crossing.

If he goes through, he would be kicked out of the Library. At the last moment, Subaru grabbed the edge of the door, and as his other half was about to swing out, he stomped onto the other end.

Panting, clenching his teeth tightly, he looked up—— in front, there was a girl with an expression full of sorrow.

[Beatrice: If you have something you want to know, ask Roswaal. ——Nii-cha or Betty, won't say anything to you]

[Subaru:Why are you, almost crying]

At Subaru's final query, Beatrice cast down her eyes, and did not respond.

At last, the girl extended her fingertips and wrapped them around Subaru's fingers on the door——and took them off.

Sucked in. Thrown off. Locked out.

To the door, from the Forbidden Library —— by the heart of a girl named Beatrice.

[Subaru: ——]

Sliding through, the door vomited him out and sent him flying into the hallway.

In front of his eyes, the door that threw him out closed up violently, seeing this Subaru extended out his hand to the flap, but it was too late.

[Subaru: That Drill Loli.....]

The other side of the door was not the Forbidden Library, only another unused guest room.

He looked around at the Mansion, but couldn't feel the sixth-sense which connects him to the Forbidden Library.

——Today, he can't meet her anymore.

This realization fell on Subaru's heart.

What he wanted to hear, what he wanted to know, rather than that, he was only turned round and round by the girl's mystifying words, and kicked out before gaining anything.

[Subaru: What the hell! If you know something, then cough it up, you stingy brat! You mopey shut-in-hikikomori! Which son of the Natsuki-family do you think you are?]

Subaru kicked at the door which up until a few moments ago had been connected to the Forbidden Library, and let out a long sigh.

Shaking his head, he tried to forget the image in his mind — The last thing he saw at the time of their parting, Beatrice's expression, would not leave him.

But, surely she was...

[Subaru: With a face almost crying like that, stop shutting yourself in all alone, stupid]

Thinking it was his fault that she had that expression on her face, and having accomplished nothing, he could not blame her at all.

Chapter 4 [The Next Place]

—After Beatrice ejected him from the Forbidden Library, Subaru returned to everyone in the living room empty handed, looking rather ashamed of himself.

Awaiting him, the living room was the same as when he left. The only difference was that Otto was now sitting in Subaru's seat, and seemed to have just finished discussing something with Emilia.

Putting on a face that left no doubt in anyone's mind just how much he resented another guy talking to Emilia in anything vaguely resembling an intimate way, Subaru headed towards Otto.

[Subaru: I see you're happily chatting with Emilia-tan while I was gone, it would be nice if you go and drop dead now]

[Otto: It's not in my nature to just sit around silently and let time pass... More importantly, what kind of sane person says a line like that immediately after coming back!? It's very unpleasant when you always take your anger out on me you know!]

[Subaru (girly voice): D-don't talk like you can understand! As soon as I buy your oil and fulfill my promise, it's all over between us, we're through! So don't get the wrong idea here!]

[Otto: Could you please not talk like there's something between us that might cause a misunderstanding!?!]

In the short span of time it took Otto to yell at him for being a tsundere, Subaru, as if suddenly completely losing interest, turned towards Emilia.

Kept out of the conversation, she was clearly waiting for him and Otto to finish talking, and seeing him looking at her, she looked back up at him and asked,

[Emilia: —Were you able to meet with Beatrice?]

A surprisingly difficult question. On the one hand, the answer to her question was YES, but the answer to the question she was actually asking was closer to a NO.

While he had been able to make contact with her, he hadn't actually broached the most essential topic. He almost wanted to laugh at what a limp, indecisive, cowardly Adventure RPG protagonist he was.

[Subaru: No, it just wasn't happening]

[Emilia: Oh... Oh well, I guess that was to be expected. When Beatrice hides using 'Door Crossing', I guess there's no way to find her. Neither Ram nor I have managed to meet her after all, so...]

[Subaru: Ehm, actually, I did manage to find her. But she was, how should I say this... I guess she was in a bad mood, a bit mooney... Anyway, I wasn't able to get an answer from her. Stupid, right?]

[Emilia: You... found her?]

Having thought that he'd never been able to make contact with her in the first place, Emilia's eyes widened in astonishment. A bit surprised by her reaction, Subaru let out an "Ah?" and nodded his head.

[Emilia: I've been thinking this for a while, but... You and Beatrice are actually really close, aren't you?]

Emilia murmured in a low voice, lightly touching her lower lip with her finger as though pondering something.

In response, Subaru put on his best disapproving frown, working hard to further improve the expression that was shaping his face into something no one could misinterpret.

[Subaru: Me and Beako, friends? Please... She's like my arch-nemesis, ever since the moment we met. The first time we met she sucked out all of my Mana you know!? I don't think there's enough time left in the world for that horrible first impression to go away!]

[Emilia: Even though you made up with Julius? After all that happened between you?

Subaru you're like this sometimes, being stubborn in a reeeaaally meaningless way]

[Subaru: Being meaninglessly stubborn is the measure of a man! I'm the kind of guy who continues to carry around that kind of stupid idea, even though I know it's a bunch of crap. Plus, I HAVEN'T made up with Julius. I, hate, that guy, FOR-EH-VAR]

[Emilia: Sure, sure]

Emilia lightly brushed aside his disingenuous objections with a small laugh. Seeing this, Subaru screwed up his face to show his dissatisfaction. However, on the inside, he just felt relieved that the subject had been laid to rest.

He still hadn't had time to process his conversation with Beatrice. The sad expression on her face at the very end, he had no idea of how to even begin to make sense of it.

[Subaru: By the way, where's Frederica gone off too? How could her good judgment be so lacking that she would leave my Emilia-tan and Otto alone together...]

[Emilia: Setting aside the matter of me supposedly belonging to anyone for another time... Frederica has gone off to prepare one of the guest rooms... Since we're going to need a place for Rem-san to rest]

[Subaru: Ah, I see]

Subaru responded in a low whisper. Emilia, looking pained, narrowed her eyes.

While he hated himself for causing this expression on her face, he simply couldn't hold back the rending pain filling up his chest every time he was reminded of Rem.

However, with a blink and a shake of his head, he extinguished the grief from his expression to keep his pain from extending to Emilia. Relaxing his lips he said,

[Subaru: In that case, I better get Rem from the dragon carriage. She shouldn't be lying out there all alone..... Oh, sorry about what I said before, Otto]

[Otto: No, no, I don't blame you. After all, I sense that..... a lot has happened between her and Natsuki-san. I can hardly ask you to have your emotions in check given the circumstances]

[Subaru: It's just that when I think of you touching my Rem with your dirty, money-grubbing hands, I can't help myself..... I'm really sorry]

[Otto: There's no way you'd say something like that if you were really sorry! I also really don't think that's a line a person who just labelled a totally different girl as his should be saying!!]

[Subaru: That's just me using you in my plan to make Emilia-tan fall jealously in love with me. Don't make me say it out loud, idiot]

[Otto: You said that out loud all on your own!!]

Grinning at Otto's reliably explosive reaction, Subaru snuck a glance at Emilia's face. Having been intently observing their exchange, Emilia's lips seemed to soften just a little, and the sorrow of moments ago had all disappeared. Confirming this, Subaru drew a small sigh of relief.

[Emilia: Subaru and Otto-kun seem to be reeaally close. Even though you only met just recently...]

[Subaru: Huh, that's what you got jealous at!? Compared to my feelings for you, Otto is just a toy, a plaything on the side! I want a real and passionate relationship with you, Emilia-tan!]

[Otto: Why am I the one being discarded!? Even though this whole thing has no basis in reality, I still really don't like that!!]

Seeing the two guys heat up more and more, Emilia suddenly burst out laughing. Covering her mouth with her hand, her shoulders shuddering with laughter, Emilia managed to squeeze out an [I'm sorry] before she was finally able to continue.

[Emilia: I don't think this is the kind of situation where I should be laughing like this, but I just can't help myself... Are you sure you two haven't actually known each other for a really long time?]

[Subaru: He's a travelling merchant you know? Once his business is over, he'll be out of here before you know it..... Actually, just the thought of an un-shipped male character other than myself coming near Emilia-tan, aaah I can't stand it!]

[Otto: I don't know what that is, but in the short time I've gotten to know you I can already tell it's probably something really awful so I don't like it——!]

Seeing Otto putting his hands on his head with a somewhat traumatized expression on his face, Subaru snorted loudly, twisting his mouth.

In a way, those exaggerations were actually his true feelings. Ever since baring his heart to Emilia, Subaru chased her with an air of indomitable invincibility, and his heart is set ablaze with jealousy whenever another guy approaches her.

This is surely because the depth of his possessiveness, and jealousy, are both many times that of any normal person.

The rampant conversation in the living room was coming to an end just as Frederica returned from preparing the guest room.

[Otto: I was thinking, I'd like to check on how things are in the village nearby. Since I'm holding onto the certificates for the other merchants regarding the purchasing of their cargo, I can, to an extent, take care of distributing things to the village. Though I'll get the Margrave to pay for the costs later, of course]

After saying this, as if the fatigue from the long trip did not affect him at all, Otto hustled off towards the village.

No matter how much he showed the face of a calculative merchant, his proposal was, as 60% of the evacuees had not yet returned, nothing short of aid and support for the still nonfunctional Arlam village.

Watching Otto hide all this behind a money-hungry demeanor, Subaru was forced to quickly cover up his sense of gratitude by pretending to spit on the ground.

[Frederica: I have prepared a room in the servants quarters as instructed. ...Strangely, there was only one room that appeared to have been thoroughly cleaned]

[Subaru: Thoroughly cleaned..... The innermost room on the second floor?]

[Frederica: —Yes, that's right. Only that room seemed clean, as if everything had been thrown out except the bed... Do you, know something about it?]

As Frederica spoke of the room she had just prepared, Subaru struggled hard to keep his grief from emerging in his eyes.

The room she talked about—the innermost room on the Mansion’s second floor in the eastern wing, was the room Rem had used. Hearing the explanation that everything in the room must have been tidied up, Subaru deeply felt the overwhelming power of “Gluttony”’s Authority: the eradication of existence.

[Subaru:No. I just had a hunch; there’s no real meaning behind it]

Frederica, who saw the truth behind Subaru’s words, didn’t say a thing.

She too, seemed to possess an extraordinarily excellent disposition as a maid. Most likely, Rem and Frederica were the two who had kept Roswaal’s overly-spacious mansion functioning... Ram doesn’t count.

Going around back of the Mansion, a soft snorting sound greeted Subaru as he headed towards the dragon carriage.

Looking at where the carriage was parked, he saw an unfamiliar building that looked like a storehouse——most likely it was the place used to shelter dragon carriages, like a garage. He saw the building, and Patrasche stabled in the adjacent barn.

The ground dragon with jet black skin let out a valiant cry, extending her neck out towards the approaching Subaru in a gesture of tenderness.

Placing a fingertip against the approaching nostrils, he tickled the rough skin.

[Subaru: Sorry I never thanked you properly, Patrasche. A lot of things happened, and I know it’s late, but, I’m counting on you from here on out too, partner]

[Patrashe:]

In answer to Subaru’s words, Patrasch licked the palm of his hand with her rough tongue. Looking at their friendly exchange, Frederica tilted her head.

[Frederica: She really cherishes you. One look, and anyone could tell she is a competent ground dragon, yet to see how tamed she is...it’s astounding]

[Subaru: I haven't done anything close to taming her? If normal ground dragons are difficult to pet and hug, then I guess it's just because Patrasche has a deeper emotional capacity than the others. Or, maybe I'm just so incapable, she can't leave me be]

It's not like Subaru was being humble, it was simply the only way he could appraise Patrasche's loveliness.

Within just 3, 4 days from meeting her, how many times had he had his life saved by this softhearted ground dragon.

Conversely, Subaru hadn't done anything for her in return yet. He couldn't help but think his meeting with this ground dragon was nothing short of a blessing.

As though understanding Subaru's self-assessment, Patrasche extended her head, which was licking Subaru's hands, and rubbed her muzzle against the inattentive Subaru's cheek. Surprised at the sudden offensive, Subaru smiled wryly at the raspy sensation on his face.

[Frederica: I, think I understood what kind of person Subaru-sama is. —You, have your own hardships]

[Subaru:]

Instead of Subaru, who had his hands full with Patrasche, Frederica's words and kind gaze were directed at Patrasche, who was frolicking with him.

Patrasche stopped her movements for a moment at the deep emotion behind Frederica's words, looking at her with the pupils of a reptile, before resuming her toying of Subaru.

In that moment, the women somehow understood each other, and Subaru was completely unaware.

Anyways,

[Subaru: Sorry for making you wait, Rem. I'm sure it was cramped and dark, right? I'm gonna carry you to your room now, okay?]

After spending some time playing with Patrasche, he headed for where the dragon carriage was parked—in other words, to where Rem had been left sleeping.

There was no change, Rem was still in a deep sleep. She didn't raise any objections. Sulking at being left behind, her head turned away, cheeks puffed out...saying "Subaru-kun is so mean!", or laughing at Subaru's apology—none of it will happen.

[Frederica: —I heard about it earlier, but still I am surprised]

From behind Subaru, who was immersed in nostalgia, Frederica, who saw Rem for the first time, was unable to hide her surprise. When Subaru tilted his head at Frederica's surprised response, she quietly shook her head.

[Frederica: Nothing. It is just, her face looks very similar to the Ram I know. The only difference I see is the color of the hair... twins, as you said]

[Subaru: I'm sure it must be hard to believe, what with losing your memories and all, but I'm glad you believed me. It would make me glad if you remembered her, without thinking it was some kind of cruel joke]

Nodding at the reason for Frederica's surprise, Subaru stretched his palm out to touch Rem's cheek.

Somehow, he felt no warmth nor coldness. There was no doubt all her life-functions were active, but there was nothing left living within her.

Confirming what he had already checked countless times, Subaru again received an incurable wound to the depths of his heart. Even knowing this, he still could not help but check.

[Frederica: Subaru-sama. It would be fine for me to carry...]

[Subaru: I want to do it. Please let me. I want to be the one that takes Rem to the Mansion... to her room. Sorry I'm being selfish]

[Frederica: Not at all, it's really touching. Your eyes look like those of a murderer, but you are kind, I see]

[Subaru: I also have a heart that gets damaged from such casual dissing!]

Responding to Frederica's words, Subaru wrapped Rem up in his arms. He has carried her several times now to move her, but even so he was reminded of how light she was. It was with this body she had stood in front of him, fighting hard to protect his useless self. The more he dwelt on this, the more his feelings of just how precious she is swelled up.

[Subaru: I'll wake you, as soon as I can. So, please, scold me angrily for feeling the softness of your body with these fingertips of mine]

[Frederica: It was such a good line, until you had to go and ruin it.]

Subaru exited the dragon carriage, leaving Frederica's disgruntled words behind him. He nodded a quick goodbye to Patrasche, who had poked her head out of the stables. Subaru then entered the mansion, led by Frederica.

Led to the Eastern Maid's room——The bedroom, the room that once was Rem's.

[Frederica: You talked, with Beatrice-sama]

The statement was thrown out abruptly, as they walked.

Subaru, who had been carefully going up the stairs, looked up at Frederica's back.

She narrowed the pupils of her sharp eyes, and looked back down at Subaru with a gaze that held only intimidation. Although, Subaru understood it was only a misunderstanding, as he had the same kind of eyes, with more white area than was usual.

Coming to the correct assumption that his silence was affirmation at her question, Frederica said,

[Frederica: Is she doing well? I ask because, since my return to the Mansion, I have yet to see her face]

[Subaru: I already told Emilia-tan, but she was doing ok...I guess. Though, I couldn't talk to her as much as I normally do, since she was in a worse mood than usual]

[Frederica: Is.....that so]

As though anxious, her expression at Subaru's answer was not a bright one.

Seeing that look, Subaru couldn't help but wonder about something. It was about what the role of the girl named Beatrice actually was, in the Mansion.

Up until now, Subaru had not dug deep into her position or background.

The girl, in the Mansion of Margrave Roswaal, stayed in a mysterious magical space, the Forbidden Library, and was treated by Rem and Ram as both guest and nobility.

Then again, she seems to childishly adore Puck, a spirit contracted to Emilia, a candidate for the Royal Election, as though he were an older brother. Also, the way she behaved towards Subaru seemed appropriate for her age, though her actions during their last encounter—they were all mysteries.

[Subaru: Umm, Frederica, you've been working in the Mansion for a while?]

[Frederica: Oh, are you interested? Emilia-sama, the girl in your arms.....and Beatrice-sama...you seem to have a lot of interests]

[Subaru: Stop mixing Beako in so smoothly, I'm not interested in young kids. You can see that both my hands are filled with Emilia-tan and Rem, right? Frederica is...Honestly, it's only been a short time, but you're not my type]

[Frederica: Oh, I'm hated]

[Subaru: It's no good, you trying to yank my chain feels just like what one of Roswaal's maids would do. Oh, and it's only an issue of personal preference; I don't hate you or anything]

Frederica's eyes danced, and she laughed at Subaru's comeback, while covering her mouth with its cruel-looking fangs.

[Frederica: I'm not much concerned. You, also seem to be a worrywart]

[Subaru: It's because I hurt you when we first met. You laughed it off, but it still hurt a bit, didn't it?]

[Frederica:]

At Subaru's words, Frederica's eyes flickered with an expression of surprise this time. The smile wiped from her face, she stared at him. The gold in her eyes sparkling, she slid her gaze to meet his, and Subaru was met with the sensation that she was trying to look through him.

Slowly letting out a small sigh, Frederica said,

[Frederica: It is not very often that someone sees into my heart. I would appreciate it, if you refrained from doing so]

[Subaru: I just tried to put back together what I'd trampled over. Besides, I'm one to talk, what with my eyes being just as fierce looking.....well, for me it's the whole family though]

Since both his parents had naturally fierce expressions, their son had it too.

During dinner, they all wore the same expressions as they squirted out mayonnaise from their own personal tubes, and it probably looked as though they were performing some Black Magic around the dining table.

Frowning as he saw his own memories objectively, Frederica deepened her sigh even further.

[Frederica: You are not a discomforting guy, just really strange. I think I understand why Emilia-sama behaves the way she does]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, what?]

[Frederica: It is nothing. This time, Emilia-sama would truly be upset with me. What will you do once you know how long I have worked here?]

Shaking her head, Frederica shifted the topic back.

Even though he couldn't make sense of those words, Subaru too returned to the original topic.

[Subaru: So the thing is, I wanted to talk about Beako... Beatrice. If you worked here as a maid for a long time, then I wanted to ask how long she's been living in the Mansion]

He hadn't voiced it as a question or anything, but from Subaru's estimation, Frederica was several years older——Around 23 or 24. Even if she was a veteran maid of ten years, and since Beatrice was around twelve now by all accounts, all he had to do was count back and he could come up with an estimate.

But, at Subaru's question, Frederica shook her head.

[Frederica: I am sorry, but I do not know. Beatrice-sama has shut herself up in the Library a long time, since before I started working in this Mansion]

[Subaru: Ah, well I guess it can't be helped. Your background as a maid doesn't necessarily mean it directly correlates with how long you've worked in Ros-chi's Mansion. So you came to the mansion as an expert maid then...]

[Frederica: No, that is not the case, Subaru-sama]

Frederica interrupted Subaru, who felt his conclusion had been denied by a rather plausible reason.

As Subaru furrowed his brows, she straightened her back, and complemented by her vicious countenance and a noticeable concern, she said,

[Frederica: The only place I have worked at as a Maid, is here at the Master's mansion. And when I was first taken in as a servant, I was 12 years old. That was over 10 years ago]

[Subaru:Wait, isn't that weird? Because, calculating back since then, that would mean Beako has been shut-up in that moldy room from when she was a toddler]

[Frederica: Don't you, already know?]

As though criticizing Subaru's stubbornness, Frederica shook her head.

With her attitude confirming a doubt he had held within his heart, Subaru understood what he had tried to avoid thinking about too deeply.

In other words, the girl in the library—

[Subaru: Her appearance hasn't changed. I guess she really isn't human then]

[Frederica: Since the beginning of the Mathers Family, the librarian who took an oath to continue watching over the Forbidden Library—that is who she is, the Great Spirit Beatrice-sama]

Unable to detect a lie in her words, Subaru was left with no choice but to accept them. The true identity of the girl he had interacted with until now, was an existence that belonged to a completely different dimension.

[Subaru: Great Spirit... that title is the same as Puck's, but she looks really different and all]

[Frederica: It relates to the absence of a contract and the oath..... no, this is more than I should say. Please forget it]

[Subaru: Impossible, totally impossible]

How many times had Subaru's ignorance caused him to be dragged around by what other people knew but wouldn't share.

Frederica did not care about Subaru's scornful glare, and tightened her lips; it seems she had no intention of touching the subject again. At her attitude and behavior, Subaru sighed, recognizing that he would be unable to pursue talking about Beatrice. Remembering their talk had continued on while their legs had ceased moving,

[Subaru: Frederica]

[Frederica: Forgive me, Subaru-sama. My tongue was a little too loose. I was just glad someone appeared that cares about Beatrice-sama. Please, forgive me]

[Subaru: It's okay, but my arms are at their limit]

His upper arms shaking, Subaru looked up at Frederica with a stiff expression on his face.

He was acting strong because "it's a light light body" and "anything's possible with love", but things like his arm strength, muscle stamina, and so on, ignored those lines, attacking him in force.

[Frederica: Oh, oh]

[Subaru: So, step away, please!]

Subaru swore to himself he would never do something as foolish as setting Rem down on the floor, or handing her to Frederica; then brushed past her and her offer to switch, heading to the guest room with hurried steps.

The sounds of soft footfalls running echoed from behind; it seemed Frederica was following behind him. Reflecting on the horrible way he had ended their talk, he arrived in front of Rem's room.

[Emilia: —You really, took your time]

Emilia said, her expression showing how monotonous her wait for Subaru had been.

Laying Rem down on the bed, Subaru pulled the quilts up over her chest. The beating of her heart, and the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed, gave testament to the fact that she still lives. Until the day her eyes open again, he wondered just how much time she would spend here.

[Subaru: I guess that'll depend on how hard I try, huh]

Turning his feelings into a new vow, Subaru gently brushed away Rem's hair resting on her brow, and then, he turned around to face Emilia, who had been standing silently behind him.

[Subaru: Sorry for making you wait. Frederica and I ended up talking about all sorts of things, and I wound up with some serious build-up of lactic acid in my biceps]

[Emilia: It's wonderful if you were sidetracked in conversation. What were you and Frederica talking about?]

[Subaru: I started by asking some questions relating to rehabilitating the shut-in little girl. How long has she been shut-in, when did it start, how she treated people after it happened... they're all closely related to her recovery]

[Emilia: Hmmm, I see. Subaru, you're really informed when it comes to shut-ins. It's amazing]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, I'm sure you didn't mean it but... your words sometimes cut me to my core. Just like right now]

It was a bit disconcerting how genuinely she seemed to be praising him. Emilia, her expression purely innocent, tilted her head and looked at Subaru, who was frowning. He replied with a wry smile, and shrugged his shoulders.

[Emilia: So, you weren't able to get Beatrice to tell you anything, then?]

[Subaru: Her mouth is shut firm and she doesn't budge. By the way, I know I've asked this a lot already but ...where's Puck?]

[Emilia: —No luck, there's still no response. This happens once in a while, but the timing is reeealy horrible this time. Geez, this is really distressing]

Reaching into her shirt, Emilia pulled out the green crystal stone. Fit in a pendant, the stone was faintly glowing. Within, a bewitching light swirled where the Great Spirit resided. It was the link that sealed the contract between Emilia and Puck, and Subaru, having seen his materialized form going in and out of that crystal almost daily, knew this as well. Only, as one could deduce from their conversation, there has been no hint of him within the crystal stone these past few days. He was gone —It was hard to believe, but he wasn't responding to their calls.

[Subaru: This, happens sometimes? But, that's got to be really exasperating for you]

[Emilia: Whenever I really, really need Puck's help, he always comes. So, I don't think he's not watching... I've asked him about what he does when he's not around, but he's never told me]

Hearing Emilia's apologetic words, Subaru scratched his head, saying, [That's...]. He couldn't hide his disappointment at the fact that Puck, who was aware of everything, would choose to remain silent. With this, all the important figures he could have relied upon for help with his doubts, had all gone silent at once.

[Subaru: Puck and Beako, both quit talking to me at the same time. ...This blows]

[Emilia: I know.....Hey, Subaru, what should we do?]

Subaru, resting his hand on his forehead, was in deep thought when Emilia asked him for his decision.

He cast down his eyes at her call. Seeing the reliance and trust that dwelt within her gaze, he despised himself for feeling so happy at a time such as this. Realizing that she was relying on him, out of that trapped, stifling feeling, he understood what he must do.

[Subaru: Since the two who might actually know something suddenly went quiet, we really don't have a choice but to move on. ...Although, even if we find that guy, whether he'll tell us anything is another matter...]

[Emilia: You mean Roswaal, right?]

[Subaru: Yeah, it's about time he spilled his guts and told us everything that's been going on, I think]

Seeing Emilia's grasp of the situation, Subaru nodded his head. Since she recognized his train of thought, she was probably thinking the same thing as well.

Emilia placed a hand over her chest, and seemed relieved that their opinions aligned.

[Emilia: I'm so glad, that Subaru agrees with me. I was wondering what I would do if you object to my proposals like Roswaal and Ram always do]

[Subaru: I might disagree depending on the details, but overall, I'm a hundred-percent behind Emilia-tan, you know? Even if I disagree with you, it'll always be because of my love for Emilia-tan, I hope you can believe me]

[Emilia: Love... —Subaru, you reeeally know how to pick the opportunity to flirt]

Subaru's irresponsible pick-up line took Emilia by surprise, and she quickly turned her face away. Subaru's cheeks were reddening slightly as well as he clenched his fists, while Emilia, still refusing to look at him, said,

[Emilia: Then, I have a proposal for you, Subaru, since you're always on my side]

[Subaru: Alright, let's hear it, whatever you want]

Subaru placed a hand to his chest in respectful subservience. Seeing this, Emilia closed one of her eyes saying "Since you said it so nicely", pursing up her lips and looking back at him.

Then, taking a moment to let out a deep breath, Emilia stared directly into Subaru's dark pupils.

[Emilia: There are things we need to talk about with Roswaal, and we also have to know what happened with the villagers, right? That's why, I want to go to the "Sanctuary"]

[Subaru: "Sanctuary".....]

It was the name of a place he had heard countless times at the Roswaal Mansion. Subaru had unfortunately never been able to find out where it was, but the evacuees led by Ram had headed there to avoid the Witch Cult. At the very least, now that the sect of the Witch Cult led by Betelgeuse had been annihilated, the threat level at the "Sanctuary" should be no more than that of the mansion.

[Emilia: I've been told it's a place I'd need to visit sometime anyway, so I think this is the perfect time. I've decided that this time, I'll finally talk with Roswaal about everything]

[Subaru: W, wa, wai, wait a minute! You aren't thinking of leaving me behind are you!?!]

[Emilia: Eh?]

Holding his hand up in front of him at Emilia's enthusiastic words, Subaru put a damper on her decisive declaration. But even so, Subaru had to say it.

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, I know you're getting pumped, and I'm in agreement, but you can't just leave me behind. I know I'm weak and dimwitted, but I'd hate it if I couldn't try my best by your side. I know it's selfish, but please understand!]

Hearing Subaru's ardent, relentless words, Emilia's eyes widened.

But they were unmistakably his true thoughts. Subaru was going to stay with Emilia. If he wasn't with her, he couldn't protect her. He couldn't do anything for her. There was no pretense to his feelings, it was simply that his existence was necessary to help her. It had nothing to do with him wanting something in return, it was simply what he wanted to do. Emilia's expression still showed her astonishment at the forcefulness of Subaru's words. Deciding that now would be the best time to throw her off balance, he continued.

[Subaru: It's no use if you try and stop me. I'm going with you. I've no intention of getting left behind. Whether it's the "Sanctuary" or Roswaal we're going to face, nothing will stand in the way of my burning love for——]

[Emilia: There's no way I'd leave you behind. Come with me]

[Subaru: I don't want to get left behind, no no NO! —wait, what did you say?]

Subaru, still half-way down on the floor and about ready to grovel and plead, asked Emilia this question.

Seeing his display, Emilia placed a hand against her lips, her face reddening ever so slightly.

[Emilia: Like I said, come with me. I'd be too anxious if it was just me]

[Subaru: Eh, Emilia-tan.....]

[Emilia: Subaru, I'm counting on you. I don't think you're weak, or dimwitted. I, need your strength]

[Subaru: ——]

The impact those words had on Subaru went beyond description. His mouth agape, Emilia's face clouded over with uncertainty at his stillness. Lifting up her hand, as though struggling over whether to reach out and touch him or not,

[Emilia: Ah, uhm, wh, what's the matter? Did I say something strange again?]

[Subaru: The switch to my motivation is in your hands. Whether it's on or off, depends on just a word from you. I can't take it]

Covering his face in his hands, Subaru spoke teasingly to Emilia. [Eh? Eh?? What do you mean?], unable to read the intention behind his words, Emilia fumbled for a reply. Seeing her so confused, he almost wanted to rub it in her face. After all Subaru had just went though at her hands, he's savoring every last bit of it.

[Frederica: —It sounds like you've come to an agreement]

[Subaru: Gyaa—!?!]

Their exchange, which must have looked like two people flirting, was tragically interrupted by a knock on the door followed by Frederica's entrance.

Emilia wasn't surprised by her arrival, but Subaru, trying hard to conceal the thumping of his heart, couldn't help but glare at her. Even though Frederica must have easily seen through Subaru's feelings, not a hint of it appeared in her calm, but still vicious-looking expression.

[Frederica: I have no objections about the two of you heading to the "Sanctuary".

However, preparations will take about two days]

[Subaru: By preparations, does that mean you're coming with us?]

[Frederica: Not at all. As I still have duties here, I will be unable to accompany you. I will instead give the directions to the "Sanctuary" to the ground dragon you brought back with you]

[Subaru: You mean Patrasche?]

Subaru widened his eyes at the unexpected proposition. His response received a [Why, yes] from Frederica, who continued as though it were obvious.

[Frederica: Ground dragons are very clever creatures. If you instruct them properly, they can understand which roads to take well enough that a guide is unnecessary. Since she seems especially clever, I don't think it will be an issue]

[Subaru: Patrasche, you just keep on getting more and more valuable! Really, just what triggered this turn of events?]

[Frederica: More importantly, there are several things I must tell you two]

Subaru tilted his head trying to understand his partner, but Frederica ignored his question, straightening her muscled body, she looked at both of them,

[Frederica: If you are headed for the "Sanctuary", there are several things I would like you to remember. Especially Emilia, I would like you to be careful of the issue of your birth and appearance]

[Emilia: —Yes, I've prepared myself. After all, I've heard it's a place with some complicated issues]

At Frederica's dire warnings, Emilia tightened her jaw, the look in her eyes carried her strength of will. To show he respected her decision, Subaru moved to stand beside her.

[Subaru: Honestly, I don't know anything about that place except that it's called the "Sanctuary".....but my supreme goal is to support Emilia-tan. So I'll listen to whatever you have to say]

[Frederica: Actually, I sense a very refreshingly pure, ulterior motive there]

Exasperation and admiration flashed through Frederica's eyes at the same time, then, blinking once, she pushed down her sentiment, and held up a finger.

[Frederica: In that case, let me tell you about the "Sanctuary". But before that, there is one thing I need you to remember]

[Subaru: Need us...]

[Emilia: ...To remember?]

Subaru and Emilia's heads tilted at the same time. Seeing this, Frederica nodded with a [Yes], dropping her voice ever so slightly.

[Frederica: —Beware of someone named Garfiel. Within the Sanctuary, you two must be very careful, of coming into contact with that man]

Chapter 5 [The Emilia-Faction]

Just as Frederica declared, it was two days later when they set out for the Sanctuary.

In between her duties at the mansion, Frederica had been teaching Patrasche in the stables about the location of the Sanctuary. Since she was responsible for most of the work at the mansion, Subaru suggested she could lighten her workload if she just told him the location of the “Sanctuary” directly, but

[Frederica: My apologies, but the location of the Sanctuary is of great importance to our master. As a mere servant, I cannot act rashly in this matter. I would have preferred to not even teach it to the ground dragon if I could avoid it]

So she politely refused to teach him.

Although it didn't sit well with him, complaining about Roswaal's over-cautiousness wouldn't get him any closer to the Sanctuary. And considering how things were unravelling, Subaru had no choice but to submit to Frederica's judgments.

And so, Subaru spent two uneventful days hanging out with the villagers, and, returning to the role of a servant, performing some of the menial tasks at the mansion.

All the while, pursing up her lips in annoyance that Puck still wouldn't come out, Emilia, who also had nothing to do, would timidly follow Subaru to the village and make an effort to reduce the distance between the villagers and herself. And also, reading all sorts of books and texts Subaru couldn't understand, she spent her time building her knowledge. As they each spent their two days in their respective ways, there were a few changes that occurred.

The first was,

[Otto: Aaah! Why is everything dumped in a heap!? Documents that need to be prioritized, documents that can be discarded as soon as they've been read, and documents that aren't even worth reading, when they aren't sorted properly it ends up like this.....!]

Scratching his head violently while grumbling, Otto sorted the documents around him at an incredible speed. Quickly looking over a document and roughly grasping its contents,

he tossed it into one of the giant sorted piles on the table, then onto the next, and the next, he continued to separate and organize. Watching Otto's eyes and hands flicker here and there, turning his head from side to side so quickly one would almost expect to see flames shooting out, across the table, Subaru, resting his chin in his hands, sighed in amazement,

[Subaru: Haa, that's amazing! If it was me, even if they were printed out neatly it'll still be gibberish to me...]

[Otto: It's not as if I'm trying to understand them. I'm only separating them into documents relating to finances, relating to petitions, and various other types efficiently first. If only each document was sorted when they first came in..... But, looking at this arrangement, it's organized in a way that only the man himself could understand, I'm afraid]

It was unheard of, that Subaru should find himself feeling a sense admiration for Otto, who was glaring at the mountain of documents looking rather appalled. Hearing him speak of the documents' owner — Roswaal's face emerged in Subaru's mind, and he couldn't help but feel that, despite being blurted out casually, Otto's theory was probably spot on. It's a frightening thought, to think Roswaal would be so capable that he could see some kind of logic to this giant pile of documents. But the problem was, that since no one else could understand it, without him here, there was no choice but to sort them all from scratch.

[Otto: Ok, it's in broad categories now. Next, is to arrange them in chronological order... But before that, maybe I should separate them more into processed and unprocessed first...]

[Subaru: I don't know whether I should call you meticulous or obsessive compulsive, but Otto, you're definitely a Type-A, aren't you]

[Otto: What's a /taɪp eɪ/? That doesn't sound like anything good at all]

Seeing Otto stare at him, Subaru waved his hand from side to side without bothering to explain. It's not like he actually believed that blood type had anything to do with one's personality, aside from being useful as a half-assed conversation topic.

Incidentally, Subaru is Type-B ——or rather, the entire Natsuki-family is Type-B.

Whenever this was mentioned to someone, the reply they get would always be [I knew it], and so it wasn't a very pleasant subject for them.

[Otto: Wait, now that I think about it...]

[Subaru: What's that, why did you stop? You were going at such a great pace, keep going]

[Otto: As someone who cares about efficiency, I don't really mind doing this, but isn't this situation a bit odd? Why am I, a travelling merchant, standing in the Margrave's office with sweat all over my forehead working so hard to sort through his documents? Isn't my position a bit odd here?]

[Subaru: That took you pretty long to notice, didn't it?]

Seeing Otto only just now noticing all this, Subaru lowered his head and laughed deviously. The reason Otto was performing this menial task—— rearranging documents pertaining to the Margrave's affairs no less, was all entwined with Subaru's schemes...

That is, to secure useful talents for the Emilia-faction in the Roswaal-camp.

In the present situation, as Subaru sees it, Emilia's position in the Royal Selection isn't good at all. As her Knight, or at least as someone generally recognized as such, he was instrumental in repulsing the Witch Cult and slaying the White Whale, but, compared to the abysmal negativity still surrounding Emilia's situation, just how much of an effect did all this have is still a question.

Compared to each of the other camps, Emilia was behind before the race had even begun. Further increasing the difficulty of her position was the fact that her key supporter, Roswaal's true intentions are still utterly indiscernible. Although he was publicly backing her, so far, Roswaal's performance as her patron could only be described with the word "failed".

He failed to prepare a single countermeasure against the Witch Cult even though he should have foreseen it from a mile away, and now, after having overcome that threat, they don't even have a way to contact him. If he could just come out and announce whether he is an ally or enemy already... either way, he is certainly a troubling existence.

On top of that, the people surrounding Roswaal all tended to keep their mouths shut when it comes to their master's true intentions. Revering Roswaal above all else with unquestioning devotion, Ram's behaviour was only to be expected, and Frederica, with her strong dedication to her role as a servant, would not say anything either. Even Puck and Beatrice would not break their silence on the matter to Subaru and Emilia.

In other words, there was not a single person Emilia could safely confide in.

Of course, Subaru wanted to become that person to her, and was in fact acting in a way befitting such an existence, but Subaru's reach was too short, even compared to an average person. He was sadly aware of the fact that he was not a man who could reach her every itch, and by himself alone, he could not wipe away her every discomfort, and this bothered him to no end.

So then, the one who caught Subaru's eye was the man going back and forth between Arlam village and the mansion, the one who would smack his lips after dinner and tea saying things like "Aaaa, having no ambition and getting settled down like this would surely make anyone rot" while smiling relaxedly... Otto.

[Subaru: In other words, the "if there aren't any allies around, why not start cultivating some now" battle plan]

[Otto: I find what you suddenly said somewhat disturbing, but what does that have to do with me!?!]

[Subaru: Hmm, I dunno... Maybe... Ah, Otto-san. You still haven't sorted the documents over here]

[Otto: Oh, sorry. Let's see, the mining locations for arcane minerals and the quantities of their reserves and this..... AREN'T THESE THE KIND OF DOCUMENTS OUTSIDERS ABSOLUTELY SHOULDN'T BE ALLOWED TO SEE!?!]

[Subaru: Aah, you saw... I see, you saw them... Aaah, ok, ok. Yeah, well, I'll to do my best to explain it to Roswaal, so don't worry, ok?]

[Otto: It's amazing how nothing in that sentence puts me at ease!]

While Otto was complaining and trying to hold the documents he'd just been given as far away from his eyes as possible, Subaru just grinned, acting like he was only some

innocent observer. Seeing Subaru's attitude, Otto's face took on a look of horror, and he said, with his lips shaking,

[Otto: I don't want to believe it, but are you really trying to make me disappear by showing me documents no outsider should see, and then not coming to my defense when there's trouble? Just to trample over the terms of our agreement?]

[Subaru: Of course not! The payment for your cargo and the favor you asked, I intend to fulfil all of them. And on top of that, I'm going to drag you even further into this, until you're in so deep that you won't be able to run away]

[Otto: Do you really have to be so twisted!? I'm just a little traveling merchant, I don't know why you are trying to put so much weight on my shoulders, but please stop it!!]

With a face that looked completely overwhelmed, Otto tried to object. Hearing this, Subaru felt he might have gone a little too far, so nodding his head lightly and changing up his expression, he mumbled [my bad] softly,

[Subaru: I went a bit too far there. I have so many different things filling up my plate, and I'm in such a hurry to sort out all these tangled threads, that I didn't even think to ask you how you felt about it, sorry]

[Otto: Ah, no, if you become so reasonable all of a sudden, I'll feel disoriented.Uh, I wonder if I can ask, but... What makes you expect so much from me?]

Seeing Subaru suddenly talking to him so normally, Otto got a bit confused, but he basically accepted this, and asked him this question.

After all, from his perspective, he had only known Subaru very recently, and there wasn't really anything to justify much trust between them. Of course, even for Subaru, their relationship wasn't a very strong one.

They had some contact in the previous loops, so now he had a slightly favorable impression of him, but that was all.

But if so, then why was he drawn to Otto like this?

[Subaru: Honestly, it's not like I have any particular reason to be interested in you or anything. It's not like I value you as an individual... so it has mostly to do with you meeting the criteria]

[Otto: That's awfully frank! ——I guess I can understand... but what was the criteria?]

[Subaru: The fact that you're completely unrelated to any of the factions in the Royal Selection. And being good at weighing gains and losses, and your ability to negotiate and gather support are obviously valuable qualities. And, most importantly, you don't seem to discriminate against Emilia for being a half-elf, or see her in a different way because of it]

[Otto: ——]

Hearing these three reasons, Otto stared at him without saying a word.

Considering the situation Subaru and the others had found themselves in, these are all conditions that cannot be neglected. And up to now, as Subaru judged, this man: Otto Suwen, was the only person to have met all of them.

Otto, still without a word, was waiting for Subaru.

Unlike when they were bantering just moments earlier, his eyes were lit with a calm, calculating brightness, flickering as if trying to peer into Subaru's mind.

Subaru understood he was being evaluated. Nor was he trying to hide. He had been evaluating Otto to begin with, so of course this is only fair, but...

[Subaru: Also, and this is just my personal opinion...]

[Otto: ——Let's hear it]

[Subaru: I feel like I can get along with you. Frankly, even though there is nothing better than gaining more allies for Emilia-tan, it's an extra bonus if we can get along. Ah, and also because you don't have any feelings for Emilia-tan as a woman. Because if it ever comes to that, even if we were lifelong friends I'll have to cut you down.....!]

[Otto: You'd kill your love rivals!?!]

[Subaru: If I had any rivals, I'll have zero confidence in me being able to win! Don't you underestimate my self-loathing! In my life up to this point, the number of people who actually like me can be counted with a single hand, you know!]

Specifically, his parents, Rem, Wilhelm, Emilia, and with some reservations, Julius and Reinhart... and that's about it. Actually, come to think of it, the count went past one hand just now.

Receiving this kind of appraisal after coming into this Parallel World... perhaps he was actually becoming more respectable after all. Even though he couldn't see any of it in the mirror.

Anyway,

[Otto: Geez, you really are a refreshingly straightforward person. But, without any kind of reservations when sitting across a merchant on the negotiation table, you might as well be a sitting duck, you know?]

[Subaru: If this were a negotiating table even I might try to hustle you a little, but it's not a merchant and a duck sitting here, it's just me and you, right? But, if that's how you see things, I'll go change my equipment and my attitude...]

[Otto: After having just praised me for my aptitude as a merchant, you go and say something like that? That idiom about how your tongue hasn't even dried before changing your words applies perfectly here!What is it with you?]

With a bothered-looking expression, Otto sighed, and all signs of the suspenseful and guarded attitude of moments ago disappeared from his face. He took a quick glance at Subaru, who was trying to look indifferent, and said,

[Otto: I don't know why I'm saying this here but, Natsuki-san, I have a goal too... It's not something so grand that I could brag about to other people, but it is a dream nonetheless]

[Subaru: I think a man's dreams can either be so ridiculous that they need to be ludicrously exaggerated, or so ridiculous that they have to be kept inside and never told to anyone, those are the only two kinds there are, I feel, but are you going to tell me yours?]

[Otto: The fact that I agree with you is really unpleasant... Anyway, you see, I was born the second son of a fairly successful merchant family. Ever since I was little, I was brought up in an affluent environment, though when it came time for me to become independent, I didn't receive much support]

Subaru didn't know how many similarities there would be between the sibling situations of this world and the world where he came from, but at least the same basics of passing on titles and inheritance seemed to apply here as well —specifically, that it would be passed on to the eldest son.

In that case, as Subaru had expected of a fantasy-world set in the middle ages, Otto, having been born as the second son, only had a choice of either becoming his elder brother's assistant, or aiming for independence by himself.

[Otto: While helping my brother manage his business, I learned the fundamentals of the trade, and managed to save up enough money to set out on my own. With that money, I bought Furufu, my ground dragon, as well as a wagon to go with him, and... Well, I also had the Divine Protection I was born with, so all in all, it went pretty smoothly, I think.

[Subaru: By Divine Protection, you mean the Divine Protection of "Anima Whispering", right? Being able to talk to different kinds of animals, depending on how you use it, I guess you could make quite a crazy profit from it]

[Otto: But it's not as useful as you make it sound... There are quite a few inconvenient problems that comes with it that Natsuki-san hadn't thought of. In any case, it was followed by several years of me plugging away and barely scraping by, but in that time, something of a dream had sprouted inside my mind...]

Continuing with his story after delving into how he became independent, Otto once again brought up the word "dream". Hearing that, for no particular reason, Subaru sat up properly, as if to listen attentively. Receiving this attention, Otto smiled warmly, and started off with [It's a pretty common dream, you know],

[Otto: Any merchant who's been a traveling merchant will have this dream. ——It's to own a place of my own, just like having my own castle, to have my own shop... to settle down there and do business there. If I could have this in some big city, it'll probably be the greatest happiness a merchant can hope for]

[Subaru: That's your dream, Otto?]

[Otto: It's a pretty boring thing to hope for... But after having traveled and traveled, in the end, all I want is just to have the same thing I had when I was growing up. But, well, I guess you could say, that environment had been the symbol of happiness for me]

Scratching his cheeks in embarrassment, Otto spoke faster and faster to try to cover it up. Subaru took in Otto's answer, and, wondering whether he would get a favourable reply, he leaned back, and dropped all his weight into his chair.

But, aloof to Subaru's concern, with a [That's why], Otto continued on,

[Otto: A chance to make a big shot like the Margrave indebted to me... as the second son of a trader family, as a traveling merchant, and as a great merchant of future to come, I can't possibly let such an opportunity pass me by. Especially considering I'd be selling a favor to someone who might become the future King of this country, it's a business opportunity so huge that even if I redo my entire life I won't be able to find the likes of it again, isn't it?]

[Subaru: Ok, so you'll join us then. Thanks, I'm glad. I knew you'd make the right choice, Otto. Now keep sorting the documents]

[Otto: What!? That was a pretty good speech just now wasn't it?? Isn't that reaction too lacking!?!]

[Subaru: I feel like letting it make an impression on me would mean that I lose somehow... Well anyway, the moment you touched these documents that no outsiders are allowed to see, there was already no way out for you. Kekkekeke!]

[Otto: No matter how I look at you, you're still a terrible person!]

At the end of this long conversation, it seemed as though nothing had actually changed, and Otto didn't receive much compensation for his newfound determination.

But even while teasing Otto like this, deep down, Subaru was thankful for it..... Though these words will never come out of his mouth.

[Otto: But I have to say this first, unlike Natsuki-san who supports Emilia-sama unconditionally, I'm only cooperating because of the present circumstances. If the Margrave and Emilia-sama ever fight amongst themselves inside the faction, I'll need to weigh the gains and losses before choosing a side. So please don't mistake me for a full-fledged ally]

[Subaru: If you're weighing Emilia-tan and Roswaal on a balance scale, you're completely in my hands. I will slowly and surely feed you all of Emilia-tan's good qualities, so don't you worry. —You heard everything loud and clear just now, right?]

Brushing aside Otto's long-winded excuse, at the end his last sentence, Subaru turned his face and his words toward a completely different direction. Seeing Subaru do this, Otto,

stunned with a dumbfounded expression on his face, turned his gaze to where Subaru was looking. And there,

[Yep... I mean, Yes. I heard it properly, Subaru-sama.]

With a lovely smile, the girl in maid's uniform swung her chestnut-colored hair, standing there at the door.

Of the changes that took place in the Mansion during these two days, this was the second.

—

With only Frederica, (Subaru was also helping, but his ability as a servant was half-assed at best, and his health still hasn't fully recovered yet) managing everything at the mansion alone was physically impossible. So Frederica, understanding this, went down to the village personally to recruit some help, and that's where this girl jumped in with open arms — Petra Leyté.

Being a resident of Arlam village, and being among those who evacuated to the Capital, she had safely returned with them. But since most of the other villagers had not yet returned, it must have been an unsettling time for her.

But still, when Frederica came to recruit a new maid for the mansion, she instantly jumped in. And as there were no other candidates who were interested, she was picked up, and was now working in the Mansion in temporary employment.

[Subaru: You are still so small, but you're leaving your parents and coming here to work as a maid, you're amazing, Petra]

[Petra: I'm already twelve, so I'm an adult who can work now... Actually, I am just an adult. Subaru-sama could you treat me like one please?]

[Subaru: I will consider it, if you say it politely, after you get the "temporary" part removed from your "temporary employment" and after you get an official certificate from Frederica. Until then, I'll always treat you like a cute little girl~]

When he patted her head clumsily as she squirmed around, the girl, with her neatly arranged hair all messed up, let out a quiet [Eeek—], and clung onto him tightly. It was a completely different reaction than what he expected, but it was certainly a lot better than being abused and spat on.

In any case, she was at an age where she wants to be older than she is and stand up on tiptoes. Petra, with her surprisingly strong character, and her own way of growing up, her aptitude for being a maid was really quite high. Although she didn't meet all the points, in cleaning up the Mansion and preparing food with Frederica's support, she has already surpassed Subaru in ability.

....Well, Subaru is really useless.

—

So, from outside the door of the Master's office, she had been pricking up her ears to listen in on the conversation inside. She was, of course, acting on Subaru's instructions, and needless to say, it was all part of his scheme to lure out Otto's commitment and cut off his escape.

Noticing all this, Otto's face turning red, he glared at Subaru,

[Otto: It was a s-set-up—— !?]

[Subaru: It's nothing to be concerned about. With a third person involved, your statements earlier are now legitimate official record. It was an emotional, heartrending manipulation in order to secure witness testimony for the jury later..... so think of it like that]

[Otto: What is so emotionally heartrending about a man talking about "manipulation"!?]

Hugging his own head, Otto, finally understanding there was now nowhere to run, shouted at them in a half-crying state, but it was too late. Giving Otto a grin, Subaru held up his thumb to Petra, who was standing at the door.

[Subaru: Good job, Petra! But won't you get scolded by Frederica, using time on something like this?]

[Petra: Right now, I'm spending my time sweeping the corridor. Using even more time to sweep the corridor in front of the the Margrave's office, I wouldn't be scolded.]

[Subaru: You're very shrewd~. Even a small girl is a woman, after all.....]

Listening only to the second half of Subaru deeply emotive words, Petra cheerfully loosened her cheeks. Seeing her predictably unchanging reactions and attitudes, it was true that there was something in there that warmed Subaru's heart.

Petra, like Otto, is another ally who is not under the influence of Roswaal.

Compared to Otto, there was not much she could do for Emilia, and her significance and influence is probably even less than Subaru's. But, she is not afraid of Emilia. On the road to the Capital City during their evacuation, she wholeheartedly remained at Emilia side. Subaru would not forget that, and, probably, Emilia would never forget either. Her being there, perhaps there will be a time when Emilia will be saved by that existence. [Subaru: It never hurts to have more allies. What you can do isn't a problem... What is important is what you are willing to do, and what you will strive to able to do for that person. After all, if I am counting the number of things I can do, it'll look really bad for me...]

His merits and his deficiencies, Subaru could probably count with his fingers and figure out that he had more deficiencies. But even so, he wants to be her ally, and so he has to use the few things he does have to their full potential, and keep on going, one way or another.

With a to-hell-with-it attitude, with nothing to stop him, embracing this over-optimistic explanation,

[Subaru: We are definitely small, but let's do our best from now on. This is what we are, the very first members of the Emilia-faction!]

Making a fist and punching it out into the air, Subaru made his declaration.

Seeing that, Petra and Otto, having been left out, looked at each other's faces, and

[Otto: I never said that I'm a part of that faction, right? Please don't misunderstand, okay?]

[Petra: I want to be an ally of big sister too, but I don't want to lose to her in what's important...]

Otto looked appalled, holding his head. Petra, joining her hands behind her back, looked down and muttered hesitatingly.

But still, in the end, they succeeded in matching up their fist bumps, so that there could be no doubt remaining in any bystander's mind that they totally knew what they were doing.

—The two days before setting out toward the Sanctuary, even though it was only a tiny step forward, there was something real in all of that, and, thinking this, the wait had already come to an end.

Chapter 6 [Along The Road To The Sanctuary]

[Frederica: I will not be able to accompany you, so please take care during your journey. Also, if you would, please tell the Master that Frederica is watching over the estate]

It was the morning of departure, and the dragon carriage was parked outside the front of the mansion. Coming to see them off, with these words, Frederica bent the small of her back in a bow.

Her form in her bow was so beautifully refined, that anyone receiving it would be intimidated into naturally straightening their backs.

In any case, receiving this, Subaru and Emilia met each other's gaze.

[Emilia: I am the one who should be sorry, I know how hectic things are right now... Roswaal is absent, and I really should be the one acting in his stead, yet.....]

[Subaru: Anyway, Emilia and I are clueless when it comes to caring for the mansion. Even if I can handle routine tasks, everyone could see how much of an amateur I am when numbers are involved. I tried throwing Otto into all that to sort it out, but it's like sprinkling water on hot coals]

Looking at the results over the past two days, Subaru could only smile wryly at how futile their efforts had been.

He and Otto wandered aimlessly through the cluttered office, and the only thing they learned was that "it's impossible without any explanation from the one responsible" ...That one statement pretty much summed up the extent of their progress.

Frederica seemed to have a rough idea, but it would take time to cover the discrepancy after her months of absence. Actually, thinking of how much work was involved in just maintaining the mansion, it wouldn't have been right to increase her workload even further.

Emilia had attentively taken care of some of the simple tasks, but aside from that, she had no choice but to plug her ears to the rest of it, even though she knew they would start piling up.

[Subaru: It's like that feeling when you put off doing your summer holiday's homework, and then the next thing you know, it's the first day of the new semester. But I was never the kind of guy who doesn't hand in his homework, though]

[Emilia: I don't really understand, but isn't that a good thing? Right now, I feel the complete opposite, and my chest reeealy hurts. It's not that I feel guilty, but I know it's not good to leave everything neglected like this]

[Subaru: It's not actually our fault, that's how I would rationalize it, but it's hard for Emilia-tan, isn't it? Well, I totally understand how unpleasant it feels to just watch things go from bad to worse...]

It was vexing, to have to neglect things that really shouldn't be put off. But while he could sympathize with Emilia's sense of guilt, it was also true that there was not much he could do to help.

In the end, he was insufficient, so the only thing to do is to call someone more competent:

[Otto: The ground dragons are all ready to go. Even though it's only been a few days since they exerted themselves, Natsuki-san's Patrasche looks like she's chafing at the bit to get going]

[Subaru: She's a good hard-working girl, isn't she? Her previous owner must have had an impressive character, unlike her current one... You think she can guide us there? It'd be horrible to get lost on the way and end up stranded]

The one who broke into their conversation was the man sitting in the driver's platform of the dragon carriage, conversing with the two ground dragons, Patrasche and Furufu — Otto.

Since the Divine Protection of "Anima Whispering" only applied to Otto, to a bystander, he just looked like he had a screw loose in his head while he was talking to the ground dragons, but Subaru didn't remark on it.

Not noticing that Subaru was sending him a heart-warming look, Otto only responded to his question with a straightforward [uh-huh], nodding.

[Otto: Frederica's directions were good, and there doesn't seem to be any problems. I'm sure we can make the trip in under half a day]

[Subaru: I see, I see.....But, were you really planning on coming too?]

[Otto: Of course I am coming!!]

After Otto's gave his seal of approval on Patrasche's directions, Subaru nodded and moved on to his next question, to which Otto stomped noisily on the wooden platform, bulging his eyes.

[Otto: After all, this will be my first meeting with the Margrave. Sure, I was the one who asked you to introduce me, but imagining the kind of introduction you'd give if I wasn't there.....It's too frightening, I can't just leave it to you!]

[Subaru: Oy oy, I'll get all flustered if you keep trusting me so much]

[Otto: Yeah, though we've only known each other for a short while, I already trust you 120% —I can be certain that Natsuki-san will always do exactly what I don't want you to do!]

Subaru twisted his lips at these words, and Emilia, who had been listening silently up to now, let out a sudden burst of laughter.

The two men turned to the source of the laughter at the same time, and Emilia timidly raised up her hand,

[Emilia: Really, you two are such good friends. Whenever I see you together, you're always bickering so affectionately, it makes me kinda jealous]

[Subaru: If you want, I'll be affectionate toward Emilia-tan too, only I'll be flirting instead of bickering. I'll move Emilia-tan's bickering time to Otto's timeslot, and replace it with the affectionate time from Otto's timeslot]

[Otto: If you do that, there won't be anything between us except insults and fist fights!?!]

Subaru was pretty confident in his skill with words and insults, but if it comes to fighting Otto in a melee, he's not entirely sure he could come out on top. Otto looks pretty genteel, but Subaru knew personally how strong he was.

In a previous loop, after a harsh exchange, Otto had thrown him off a carriage. Knowing that his opponent wasn't just a pushover, Subaru figured his chances were pretty slim if they ever ended up head-to-head.

[Subaru: Thinking about it like that, my combat abilities are crazy low. I knew that already, but it's still depressing]

Like previously mentioned, Subaru would lose to Otto, and it goes without saying that he couldn't beat Emilia, who knows magic. He had already been demolished by Frederica, and there was no need to mention the sleeping Rem or the shut-in Beatrice. In that case, the only one Subaru had a chance against in the mansion was——

[Subaru: Come to think of it, the only one I've got a chance of beating is Petra, and I don't see her around. What gives?]

[Emilia: I'm scared to ask... but how did your train of thought shift to who you can beat? Anyway Petra has been in the mansion.....oh, here she comes]

A bit astounded by Subaru's futile efforts to gain victory by process of elimination, Emilia looked toward the mansion, her purple eyes faintly flickering. Being affected, and looking toward the same direction, he saw the form of a girl swinging her sleeves in her brand-new maid's uniform as she ran up to where they stood.

[Petra: Wait, wait a minute. Suba-, Subaru-sama.....!]

[Subaru: You don't need to rush, I wouldn't do something so heartless as leaving all of a sudden, only Otto would do something like that. Right, Otto?]

[Otto: Don't you remember what you just said three seconds ago!?]

Smiling at the out-of-breath girl, who was resting her hands on her knees, Subaru pulled Otto into the conversation with some light-hearted teasing as he waited for the girl to catch her breath. Then, wiping her brow softly, Petra looked up.

Her flushed cheeks and her big, round eyes looked adorable. She let out a long breath, releasing her fatigue, and shifted her angelic face into a smile.

[Petra: I wanted to give you this before you leave. Please take it with you]

With that, she held out her hand, revealing a simple handkerchief that seemed nothing out of the ordinary.

The edges of the white cloth were laced with a golden-color, and the tips of his fingers told him it was made with meticulous workmanship. Receiving it, he turned it over to look at the other side.

[Subaru: It's.....embroidered. Oh, it's really good]

Sewn into the surface of the white cloth, was an embroidery that was most likely hand-stitched by Petra herself. It was done with grey, pink and black colored threads, and the design was something Subaru was very well acquainted with. Just then, Emilia, who had been peeking over his shoulder, let out a small laugh [Aha].

[Emilia: It's the same Puck you drew, Subaru. Oh wow, it's really well done]

[Subaru: My disfigured Puck, yeah this is really well done. There mustn't have been much time to study it either]

[Petra: I got the stamps after doing the Radeeo Calisthenics every morning]

Forgetting to speak politely, Petra pulled something out from around her neck. It was the stamp card Subaru had made and given out to the village children. —Every morning when they participated in the radio calisthenics, he had stamped their cards with an image he'd engraved onto a sweet potato, in place of a real stamp.

She held in her hand the most recent stamp, the disfigured Puck's "Gloomy Monday". She must have worked hard, pricking her fingers as she sewed in the design.

[Subaru: It really is well done. As a Sewing Master, I can't afford to lose here]

[Petra: Will you take it.....Ah, no. Would you please take it?]

[Subaru: It's actually, "Would you please accept this". —Of course, I'll gladly accept it. It seems a shame to use it for wiping blood, sweat or tears, so I'll just keep it close as a good luck charm]

Carefully folding the handkerchief, Subaru tenderly, and with great care, put it into his chest pocket before looking back towards Petra. Then, as gently as he could—he looked to the vicious, narrowed eyes and the sharpened fangs filling up the diabolical smile that was currently pointed at Petra. Hearing his words, Petra placed both her hands on her blushing face and looked away.

[Petra: I shall await your safe return. Oh, and big sister and the noisy guy too]

[Emila: It kinda seems like I'm just an extra...]

[Otto: Wait, wasn't my assessment a little too harsh!?!]

Emilia and Otto responded to Petra's words in turn, a wry smile making its way onto their faces. Subaru couldn't help but find himself smiling, as Petra seemed to think nothing of the dense pressure emanating from Frederica behind her.

He had no doubt that the moment they leave, Petra will be set upon Frederica's harsh education. Petra, live strong!

[Subaru: Well then, while it's hard to leave you all, we should be on our way]

[Emilia: If we spend too much time talking here, it'd have been meaningless to try to leave so early]

Subaru interjected, putting an end to the vibrant conversation, before hopping up into the cargo space of the dragon carriage. After that, he held out his hand,

[Subaru: If you would, Emilia-tan. Into my arms]

[Emilia: I'm sure it would be pleasant to see the scenery from the driver's platform once in awhile?]

[Subaru: Ahh, heartless! E · M · K (Emilia-tan Major Koakuma*)! ——Oh, wah!] *little-devil
Being treated so cruelly, Subaru was almost about to withdraw his hand, when it was pulled so forcefully that he nearly fell out of the carriage as Emilia passed casually beside him.

Her silver hair brushed against his nose as she went by, until she landed inside the dragon carriage with a tiny sound. Softly sitting down across from Subaru, she tilted her head looking at him,

[Emilia: Something wrong?]

[Subaru: Nope—, nothing—?]

With these words, Subaru loudly stomped his way over to where she was, and plunked himself down beside her. Considering the inside of the carriage was very spacious, Emilia smiled at Subaru's cramped use of it.

Otto, watching their exchange, grumbled [I can't stand being associated with you] as he sat down in the driver's seat, gripping the reins and looking up at the road ahead.

[Otto: Alright then, we're off. Take care not to bite your tongues please]

[Subaru: Right back at you, don't shake the carriage too much. And if you're going to suddenly apply the brakes ——please use the signal we talked about before. Without that, it'll be hard for me to time when to push Emilia-tan down]

[Emilia: You're thinking of something like that?]

[Otto: !! I never heard that devilish plot in my life! Wait, when did I get turned into an accomplice!?!]

Emilia turned a gaze of near-disdain upon both Subaru and Otto, and didn't seem to acknowledge Otto's outcry at the false accusation. Thinking Otto's wailing at the injustice of it all suited himself well, as though that had nothing to do with him, Subaru lifted up his hand,

[Subaru: Alright. Destination: "Sanctuary". Let's be off——!]

[Otto: Who are you to say that!?!]

Seeing Otto sulking in the driver's seat, Subaru replied [You aren't good at getting hyped, are you] complainingly, before sticking his head out the window to look at the two who were here see to them off,

[Subaru: Okay now, we're leaving the place in your care. Also.....I'm counting on you... to take good care of Rem]

[Frederica: Please, leave it to me. In return, I leave Emilia-sama and the Master in your hands]

[Petra: Take care, and come back safe]

Subaru's voice held none of its usual playfulness, and as they prepared to depart, Frederica and Petra bowed in farewell.

After that stupidly formal exchange, this time, Subaru decisively ——well, unfortunately, not without some hesitation, severed his thoughts from the mansion.

[Subaru: Oy, we haven't left yet Otto? You're slo—w]

[Otto: I can't understand this treatment!!]

This exchange blowing away the rest of the tension, they set off for the Sanctuary.

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[Frederica: It seems I'm going to have to teach you to speak more politely, and bow properly again]

[Petra: I'm so sorry. It's just.....I wanted to be cosseted, if only a little]

Petra quickly lowered her head, her gesture nearly perfectly imitating Frederica's teaching. She was a fast learner, and could take things in quickly, and was certainly a student worth teaching.

The exchange from a moment ago was understandable given her age, so there was no reason to scold her over such a minor thing.

[Frederica: I know that you have been close with Subaru-sama and Emilia-sama these past few days. Still, it is not good to forget that your relationship is that of servant and employer]

[Petra: —Yes 'mam. I am deeply sorry]

The girl was conscious of the fact that her behavior had been selfish.

She could have behaved exactly as she had been taught, and seen Subaru and the rest off properly, but she had instead intentionally separated herself from her duties as a servant, and chose to see Subaru and the others off as just a simple girl... there must have been a reason for it, and perhaps the reason was small, but it was one she was unable to part with.

[Frederica: There is no propriety in discussing this further. Instead, as penance for what you did, you will be hand-copying extra texts this afternoon]

[Petra: Uuhh.....Will the number of topics increase?]

[Frederica: You should have been prepared for at least that much. Then again, if you had already calculated this would be your punishment to make up for your actions, then I am quite looking forward to your future as my student]

Saying that, Frederica clapped her hands with a [Now then], continuing,

[Frederica: Even if Emilia-sama and the rest are out for now, Beatrice-sama is still in the mansion. We can't afford to become lax with meals and cleaning. If we don't finish quickly, there won't be enough time for studies. So Petra, hurry up and finish your tasks]

[Petra: Yes, 'mam. I'll go finish them in no time!]

Watching the young girl run off, her clothes flapping, Frederica's mouthsoftened ever so slightly, revealing her fangs. With a practiced motion, she covered the smile with her hand, and looked towards the direction where the no longer visible dragon carriage had gone — —towards Emilia and the rest who had departed from the mansion.

[Frederica: It is as you said it would be, Master. Whether they can overcome the "Sanctuary" or not, is up to Emilia-sama and Subaru-sama now]

Closing her eyes, she let the gentle wind wash over her.

[Frederica: Will Emilia-sama be able to overcome it? Bound with the Witch's blood, that inescapable impasse that is the garden of paradise——]

[Subaru: So, Puck hasn't shown his face yet, after all?]

[Emilia: No, he hasn't. I do call out to him, and I still feel his existence inside the crystal but..... this is the first time he has gone missing for this long, so I'm kind of worried.]

In the smoothly galloping dragon carriage, sitting together, only Subaru and Emilia's voices resounded in the car.

Under the Divine Protection of "Wind Evasion", the sound of the wind and all the noises outside were almost completely cut off from the dragon carriage. Even while running with such great speed, the near absence of turbulence or sound all made it feel like being in something of a dream.

Perhaps, this was the same luxurious feeling that might be felt while riding in the premium seats of the Shinkansen Bullet Trains, but Subaru never had a chance to experience those seats, and not even the normal seats, for that matter.

Anyway, in the quiet interior of the carriage, the words exchanged between them can be heard crisp and clear. And here, the topic of their conversation drifted to the change that had been bothering them for the past few days — namely, the absence of the one that was usually by Emilia's side, that father-figure cat who was always thwarting Subaru's advances on Emilia... Puck.

[Subaru: Now that I think about it, he had not shown up since before we returned to the Mansion... The last time we saw him was...]

[Emilia: For me was it in the Capital City, when we were in Crusch-sama's Mansion. I thought everything was very normal, but I couldn't meet him again after that morning. Even when I call him, he doesn't show up..... I was worried if I had made him angry or something]

Looking down, Emilia played with the tips of her hair, trying not to show her face to Subaru. These few days, her silver hair had been fixed in a braid.

Seeing Subaru stare at her, as if understanding the intention behind his gaze, she nodded [Yes],

[Emilia: The final contract I made with Puck the last time I saw him was "Keeping my hair in a braid". After that, I had not been told what to do, so I kept it as it is.]

[Subaru: Your hairstyle is your contract with Puck? Really? That's really light..... isn't it? Although, it's said that hair is the life of a woman, so that's as if Puck's contract is holding a life...]

[Emilia: I think that is a really light price to pay. I didn't know this until I got out of the forest, but for getting into contract with a spirit like Puck, conditions like this one are way too light. Roswaal was also very surprised. In reality, you apparently need to have humongous amounts of Mana or complicated terms]

Seeing Emilia loosening the corners of her lips as she said this, Subaru nodded as if thinking of something. But then, he quickly lifted up his jaw to shake Emilia off of her weakened smile,

[Subaru: Well, for restricting even a little bit of Emilia-tan's time, for me, I would say that is a really heavy price]

[Emilia: Lines like that, if you keep saying it so lightly it would become superficial. If it was something important then it would be better to keep them for important timings, I think]

Emilia voiced her objections at how Subaru was finding more and more ways to flirt. On the other end, Subaru slightly raised both his hands and shook his head,

[Subaru: The secret lines reserved to tell Emilia-tan in important scenes are kept separately. This one was for daily life, one of the many lighter things to say to Emilia-tan]

[Emilia: Really, Subaru, you have a silver tongue.Oh no, maybe my face is red so don't look!]

Seeing Emilia suddenly hold up her palms to cover her face, Subaru laughed, confirming he got what he wanted. And, trying to bring the conversation back on topic, he continued with [Well...]

[Subaru: Since Puck is absent, there are some serious concerns in the combat aspect of this trip. We can't rely on Otto for fighting, and I'm obviously no good at all. And, Emilia-tan is also not as tough without Puck, right?]

[Emilia: Oh, you say things like that, huh. But I'll have you know, I can still use magic when Puck's not here. It's not just Puck, I have contracts with micro-spirits too. I have no problem communicating with them, so I can fight. I will protect you no matter what happens.]

[Subaru: Oh no, so manly... That'll mean I'm way too pathetic, aren't I... Those words, I myself will eventually say them to Emilia-tan one day, so please wait]

[Emilia: I'll be waiting without any expectations]

As if proving Emilia's words, coming nearer, and gathering closer onto Emilia's fingertips, the micro spirits appeared drifting, shining. While they looked like Julius' demi-spirits, their existences seemed weaker in comparison — and though their power was a world away from Puck's, at least, they certainly didn't appear to be a collection of defenseless beings. The only girl in the group, and the one he has a crush on, no less... having to rely on her for protection would really be embarrassing...

[Subaru: That said, my reliance on other people hasn't changed much since the battle with the White Whale. I was completely dependent on Rem then, and even before that.....wait, was there never a time when I worked everything out on my own!?!]

Of course, that was the story from his perspective, and it might have been too much of an undervaluation.

But in any case, since there was no one with enough information to find fault with this conclusion, Subaru's horrified reaction upon realizing all this was just passed off.

[Subaru: Well, Sanctuary, huh. Actually, what kind of a place could it be...]

After a bit of self-reflection, he gazed out at the scenery outside through a little window, muttering this under his breath.

Right now, to Subaru, the Sanctuary was a place of absolute unknown. The sound of the name itself did not give off a very dangerous impression, but Frederica's warnings as she spoke of the Sanctuary weighed heavily his mind. Out of those words,

[Subaru: "Beware of Garfiel", huh]

[Emilia: You hadn't met him yet either, right, Subaru? I have only heard the name too, and Frederica didn't tell me in detail either]

As if following Subaru's mutterings, Emilia's neat eyebrows narrowed anxiously as well.

The scene that emerged in her mind, was probably the same as the one in Subaru's.

The scene of Frederica's warning, to be wary of the man named Garfiel but refusing to say any more.

Even when Subaru voiced his dissatisfaction at the tiny amount of information he had been given, she only stubbornly rejected, saying [It is because of my Oath], and would not say another word. Emilia and Subaru, not knowing what to do, did not push her further.

[Subaru: I really should've gotten more out of her... Knowing full well he's a dangerous character, she's sending us there with only a name, it's just too much]

[Emilia: It can't be helped, it's an Oath. *Agreements are Holy and Inviolable, never to be breached. Contracts and Oaths and Pacts, though they vary in gravity, must all be kept equally*]

Swinging her raised finger, Emilia recited this to Subaru as if instructing him.

Contracts and Oaths and Pacts, like a word-game they flew into his ears, and the question suddenly coming into his mind, he let it slip from his lips,

[Subaru: So, between Emilia-tan and Puck is a Contract. Between Frederica and Roswaal is an Oath out of moral obligation. And then, the agreement exchanged between the Dragon and the Kingdom, is a Pact..... am I right? Or did I get something wrong?]

[Emilia: It isn't separated out so distinctly, but as I understand it, Contracts are between individuals, Oaths are made when one party swears to another, and Pacts are

agreements that transcend individuals, and transcend even Time... That's how I was taught, at least]

[Subaru: I see. It does fit that understanding of it...]

Nodding to Emilia's explanation, Subaru proceeded to violently scratch his head, and continued with [But still],

[Subaru: It's adorned with such lofty words, though... *Agreements are Holy and Inviolable*, right?]

[Emilia: Agreements..... Promises are important things. Of course, Oaths, and even Contracts have no force to protect them. It isn't there, but still, we keep promises. We work hard to keep them, right? Even if no one is watching, or no one realizes it, Promises are kept. Whether it's the other person or myself, we would do our best to keep it]

Holding her hands to her chest, Emilia locked her gaze on Subaru, who had asked the question so lightly. The tone of her voice was gentle, and there was no sense of blaming him... but his heart hurt all the more because of it.

[Emilia: Because we believe this, we give our word, and work hard to fulfill them. Because promises are kept to protect the trust between one another, right?]

[Subaru: About that... I am really sorry—— !]

In the interior of the carriage, without the slightest hint of turbulence, Subaru fell onto the floor and dropped his head straight in front of him.

Seeing him rubbing his forehead on the floor in a full DOGEZA*, for a moment, Emilia flapped her eyelids in astonishment, then a few seconds later, reflecting on what she just said combined with Subaru's current movements, she seemed to understand.

(*Dogeza is falling prostrate and pressing one's forehead and hands on the ground, for kneeling to one's lord or when praying to a God. Tappei wrote DOGEZA in English in the Japanese text :3)

[Emilia: Oh, I wasn't blaming you or anything. Well it is true that you didn't keep your promise, and then didn't even apologize, and instead turned on me, so it's true that I had gone like "what's this!"...]

[Subaru: Ow ow ow my ears hurt!]

[Emilia: But then, after thinking about it, I realized I was being unfair and was only seeing my side of things. I should have gone to reconcile with Subaru right after but I was so obstinate, that I didn't, so it was also my fault. Really, sorry]

[Subaru: Ow ow ow my chest hurts!]

[Emilia: Agreements and things like that, maybe they are deeper and heavier for me... because I am a Spirit-Arts user, contracts are more vital to me than to normal people. Spirit-Arts users must honor our contracts with spirits above all else, and that's why I'm over-sensitive when it comes to this..... Yeah, so promises are a reeeeaally big deal for me. Now that I think about it, Subaru, reflect on what you did]

[Subaru: Ow ow ow my heart hurts!]

While she was blurting all this out, as if remembering everything Subaru put her through, Emilia started to pout. Sensing this, Subaru pressed his head down even harder.

It was clear now, why she was so infuriated with him in the Royal Palace.

It was not just anger due to a broken promise. For her, the promise in itself meant something far more, and far heavier. When Subaru had broken it so lightly, even a soft-hearted person such as herself could not stay calm.

Because, without realizing, Subaru had trampled on something very important in Emilia's heart.

[Emilia: Did you, reflect on your actions now?]

[Subaru: I repent. Deeper than the oceans, higher than the mountains, wider than the skies, and more expansive than the cosmos.]

[Emilia: Alright, I forgive you]

Softly poking Subaru in the forehead as he looked up, Emilia then touched her finger to her lips, smiling lightly. Relieved that there was no hint of anger from her, and also because her next movement was so adorable, Subaru found himself unable to connect his words.

Not paying any mind to the way Subaru was moving his mouth like a breathing fish, Emilia turned to look to the road ahead, and,

[Emilia: The Sanctuary, and Garfiel. And Roswaal, and everyone from the village.....

there are so many people to talk to, right now my heart is already pounding]

[Subaru: Don't worry, I would never let Emilia-tan be put in any danger. Please trust your second shield, myself]

[Emilia: You're the second? Then, who's the first?]

[Subaru: Right now, he's driving the dragon carriage and flirting with my Patrasche]

Looking at Subaru, who had just named Otto as a meat shield without his consent, this time, Emilia couldn't hold it in and burst out laughing. Watching her breaking out in laughter, Subaru was content, and in his mind, he wondered how many obstacles will be waiting for them in their road ahead.

Ever since he came to this world, he had been presented with one problem after another without a moment's rest.

Even along the road to the Sanctuary, worries and expectations of what lies in store in that unknown land were brewing within his heart. Anyhow, Frederica herself had instigated it, and Roswaal and the fact that the other villagers had not returned only added to his doubts, and there was Subaru's own inability to get Puck to come out, and... what he left in the mansion... worried him to no end.

[Emilia: Were you, thinking about Rem-san?]

[Subaru:You can tell?]

Subaru had suddenly fell silent. Gazing at the side of his face, Emilia tilted her head.

Her silver hair slid off of her shoulder as she did so, and lifting the tip her braid with her fingers and swinging it side to side, she said, [I can], and,

[Emilia: Just like the way you always look at me, I'd think about Subaru the same way, too]

[Subaru: So that means, Emilia-tan, you are thinking about me all the time?]

[Emilia: Oh, actually take it as half of half of half of that]

[Subaru: That means 3 hours.....!]

[Emilia: Half of half of half of.....]

[Subaru: I'll get hurt if I hear the exact number, so no more!]

Calling out to stop Emilia, who had been trying to calculate the exact realistic number, Subaru dropped a small sigh and scratched his cheek, and,

[Subaru: I've entrusted her to Frederica and Petra, so there is no need to worry. There shouldn't be..... but still, this anxiety that shouldn't be welling up in me, I can't explain it in words]

[Emilia: You worry because you are worried, it can't be helped. It just means that's how important she is to you. To be thought about like that, I'm actually a little bit jealous]

[Subaru: Let me say this right now, I feel just as strongly about Emilia-tan..... wait, you just tricked me into saying that, right?]

[Emilia: Yes, I was being mean. Sorry]

Sticking out her tongue, through that one act she forgave it all.

In front of Subaru, who couldn't help but make gargle sounds with his throat, Emilia said

[But...] looking up at him,

[Emilia: The one you're even more worried about is Beatrice, right?]

[Subaru:.....Unless, Emilia-tan, are our hearts connected to each other? The "GOOD END" is already in sight!]

[Emilia: Usually you would go "There's no way I'm worried" even though you are, but today, you didn't even say that. It must mean you are really worried]

Being hit right on the mark, Subaru almost let out a "Guu", and bit his lips with a vexed expression on his face.

But he quickly snapped out of it, and

[Subaru: Worried? I'm not worried or anything. It's just, breaking off with a fight like that, I couldn't meet with her again afterwards. So leaving the Mansion without seeing her again left me with a bit of a bad feeling, that's all. Yeah, just a little bit. Just that tiny bit, just the tip]

[Emilia: That sounded a bit dirty to me, maybe I'm thinking too much into it...]

[Subaru: You're not imagining it, that was just me]

Hiding his happiness at getting the reaction he was aiming for, Subaru looked at Emilia, who tilted her head, still smiling slightly as if not understanding a thing, and

[Subaru: If Beako's hikikomori problem gets worse, being originally a hikikomori myself, I'd feel some kind of responsibility...]

[Emilia: Hikikomori..... Subaru, you know a lot about that right? Beatrice, is she coming out?]

[Subaru: It'd be really hard, actually. Without finding a good opportunity, just pulling her out forcefully isn't good, but then taking too much time would be indulging her too much. Those hikikomori are such a pain in the ass to..... Wait! I was one myself!]

After that stupid ending, he tried to correct the direction of the conversation again.

After all, since they were heading to the Sanctuary right now, it wouldn't be something they'll deal with until their return.

[Subaru: After I get back, I'll have to talk over a lot of things with Beako. Last time, I couldn't get her to tell me any of the things I wanted to know]

[Emilia: Beatrice and Puck, it feels like they know all sorts of things, and are hiding them from us]

[Subaru: I get the same feeling. Even with Frederica, but then, everyone associated with that Mansion has a habit of saying something suggestive and then leaving the answers out for later. It's like a disease already. Not the good kind of disease, either. And that Beako, returning the Gospel like that, saying things that I still can't get out of my mind...]

The Gospel, which Beatrice had thrown back at him along with her mystifying words, is currently safely in Subaru's keeping. If it was just going to be a nuisance, he could have left it behind, but in the worst case, he could interrogate Roswaal about it, so he brought it along with him.

But because it was so creepy, he kept it at the very bottom of his bag, as if quietly hiding it from sight.

[Emilia: ——I think we've entered the forest]

Emilia, suddenly lifting her face, and brushing away the hair from her forehead, said this as she looked all around. Following her, Subaru also raised his head, but from inside the carriage he could not see it right away. Stepping toward the window and peeking out, it's true that the colors outside had become deepened with green.

[Subaru: You didn't even look outside but you could tell, huh]

[Emilia: Even though it's mixed, it's because I have Elf's blood in me. They say that Elves are the race of the Forests, and so the Elves and the Forests have an inseparable bond——]

Then, just as Emilia said this with a fleeting smile,

A sudden, subtle sensation shocked Subaru's skin, and he looked around to see what it was. But of course, the impact that surged through the surroundings, was not something his eyes could see.

Inside the carriage, the Divine Protection of "Wind Evasion" still separated out the rest of the world.

But,

[Subaru: ——!? Hey, hey!]

[———]

Emilia's slender body was swaying powerlessly, and just like that, began to fall, and Subaru, sliding in, managed to catch her just in time.

Her momentum stopped by his embrace, lying feebly in his arms, Emilia's eyes were closed, on her face was a pained expression as she lay faintly panting.

[Subaru: Wait, Emilia-tan!? What happened, Emilia!?]

Emilia couldn't seem to reply. She looked as if she was in pain, but other than her shallow, accelerated breathing and her excruciating expression, there was no sign of fever or even sweating.

Lifting her up lightly in his arms, Subaru immediately realized he could not deal with this by himself. So, rushing to the front, he stuck his head through the small window connecting to the driver's platform, and

[Subaru: Otto! Something's wrong, Emilia suddenly collapsed! Do you have any medicine or.....]

[Otto: Oh— Natsuki-san, sorry]

Subaru's impatient words trailed off. Otto, at whom he had thrown these words, had sweat forming on his forehead. Turning to Subaru, he replied with a voice that seemed to have lost all strength.

Subaru noticed two things— The first, was that the carriage had stopped. Patrasche and Furufu had halted their steps, and were standing still between the trees. So overwhelming was his emotion in the previous moments that had not even realized that the carriage had stopped, but now, there was another, even more serious problem.

That was the second thing he noticed,

[???: Just waltz'n in straight from th'front, y'got some nerve, stranger]

As if spitting out the words, unlike the literal content of what he was saying, there was not the slightest hint of friendliness in the way he said it.

With only this one sentence, one could almost grasp the character of the person who spoke those words.

True to that impression, the man flaunting himself in front of the dragon carriage looked exactly what he sounded like.

With spiky short blonde hair, a white scar prominent on his forehead, the sharp leer of his eyes did not lose to Subaru's in their viciousness, and like that of a feline beast, the canine-teeth in his jaws peered out, exceedingly white. His curling, slouching back made him seem rather short for a man, but the darkly ferocious aura emanating from his entire body removed any inclination to underestimate him for his small stature.

[???: D'know where th'hell y'came from, but y'look like'a "*stake goes through with'a brittle point*" kind o'guy]

[Subaru: Huh, wha?]

Hearing a strange idiom he had never heard before, Subaru only let out a confused moan, but his opponent, listening, must have taken it for fear, and with a dismissing laugh [Hah],

[???: Oh? Y'scared eh. But's true y'struck some bad luck. After all, th'place y'tried t'sneak into was'a *place*, an'what's more, y'ran right into ME]

The man laughed viciously, clacking his fangs as he laughed, and, putting his fists together, he lowered his stance, ready for battle. And in that posture, he looked up with a glare at his silent adversary,

[Garfiel: Meet'n up with GARFIEL was th'end of y'luck. Now GET WRECKED like'a "PAZO-MAZO RIGHT AN'LEFT"!]

The punk who named himself, cussing incomprehensibly, thumped his foot into the ground.

And the moment after, the overwhelming impact, as if reversing the world, struck Subaru.



Chapter 7 [The Experimental Grounds]

The moment the punk pressed his foot into the ground, Subaru felt the illusion as if the world had tilted.

Of course, in reality, such a thing could not possibly happen. Even the largest human could not hope to disturb the foundations of the world with a simple stamp of the foot, and the sheer weight of the earth would not budge so easily.

So, the tilting of the world can only be Subaru's illusion.

What had actually happened, was that starting from the point where Garfiel's placed down his foot, a wave spread out in the ground, and like flipping a piece of tatami, it tossed the dragon carriage into the air as it passed.

[Subaru: Impossible—— Uwah!?!]

Like on the end of a see-saw, the sensation of upward momentum reached its peak, and then, as if floating, the dragon carriage glided through the air. Along with the ground dragons Patrasche and Furufu, just about exceeding one ton in weight combined, they were all blown flying. Inside the carriage, Subaru only held Emilia close within in his embrace.

Then, just like that, the dragon carriage slammed onto the ground, the sheer force of the impact sent its entire frame, inside and out, gnashing and creaking against itself. It was a high-quality dragon carriage. Its luxury did not stop at its glamorous appearance, for its quality was evidenced both in terms of comfort and durability, and this was demonstrated perfectly by the fact that it managed to avert total destruction just now. But still, in the half rolled over dragon carriage, there was no way to immediately escape.

In other words, since escape is no longer an option, the only choice remaining is to stand and fight.

[Subaru: Damn it, what was th——]

Shaking his head, which was still hanging out of the window to the coachman's platform, Subaru held a hand to his aching forehead. He had struck his head on the way down, but fortunately, other than the pain, there was no lesion or bleeding. Suddenly remembering, he looked down, and saw, lying in his arms, Emilia was unharmed.

A surge of relief washed over him, but this emotion was soon replaced by the anxiety of being reminded that the culprit who caused this was still outside.

Quickly lifting up his head, the dreaded sight that met Subaru's gaze was——

[Subaru: Patrasche——!!]

Screeching, fangs bared, the enormous jet-black ground dragon leapt toward the scrawny figure.

Making use of the loosened connection to the dragon carriage, with a twist of her body, Patrasche broke free and with rapid movements she set off against the assailant for a counter-attack.

With pointed fangs as sharp as blades, the power of her jaw can slice through human flesh and crush through bone and still have strength to spare. With speed like the wind, she aimed for Garfiel's neck, about to tear it to shred without a single question asked.

[Garfiel: Excitin' choice. Good groun'dragon..... No, yer a good girl, aren't ya. Hell, "the sound o'breaking bones' a sign o'love" astheysay]

[———!]

Lodged in her closing jaws, was the front end of an outstretched arm that should by all accounts have been completely shredded.

Garfiel had held out his right arm against Patrasche's bite. And the ground dragon, zeroing in on the target, chomped down on the wrist, ripping the forearm arm clean off, and then fell upon the torso... or at least, that was what should have happened.

But instead, Patrasche froze in place. Not only her body, but even her jaw clamping on the arm lodged inside stopped moving completely.

Was some special ability being used, or was it caused by magic?

This question turned in Subaru's mind, but soon, Garfiel's action answered his doubts. Expanding the muscles of his lodged arm, it completely overpowered the force of Patrasche's jaw, stretching it open wider and wider.

[Garfiel: G'job, you. Got goin' right away, and still not givin' up, even better. Y'passed!]

[————!]

The jet-black ground dragon lowered her body, still clenching with her mouth she twisted her waist. The strength of her jaw sealed on the man's right wrist, she swung her tail whooshing upwards to swipe him flying. Subaru took a blow from her tail once, but, watching Patrasche's movements now, it's immediately obvious how much she had been holding back that time.

Literally putting her whole body behind the blow, she directed all her hostility into striking the body that was left completely open. But even so, it was casually stopped in its tracks by Garfiel's left hand.

A dry cracking sound rang out, and after the shock dissipated, all that remained was a hand grabbing onto the end of a tail. His right hand in her jaws, his left hand holding her tail, Garfiel smiled, revealing his beast-like fangs.

[Garfiel: Won't hurt ya. Sleep tight]

Making a wide swing with his arm, like some kind of joke, the circular trajectory of its motion carried Patrasche's massive body gliding through the air. Then, all of a sudden laterally spinning with an inconceivable sensation of weightlessness, Patrasche's eyes filled with confusion as she was gently tossed to the ground.

Her massive body barely bounced as it landed, and then silence: Patrasche had been defeated. In front of this scene, Subaru's parched throat let out a groan of disbelief,

[Subaru: H, he threw Patrasche?]

[Garfiel: Such'a loyal nature. Tossed y'out gently, shouldn't hurt. Let's finish this before ya get up!]

Disregarding the stunned Subaru, Garfiel lifted up his face and hopped onto the coachman's stand. Lying on the slanted coachman's stand was Otto, in a broken-looking posture, and he tried to stand up as the attacker leaped over.

[Otto: Guh..... but, don't underestimate me! I am a traveling merchant you know! I am totally prepared for getting mugged by thugs on the road during my business. So come on, but if you rather not fall victim to the "Suwen-Family-Ryu-Thug-Repulsion-Technique" I suggest you surrender now..... Hoowah!]

[Garfiel: Shut up, ham. What d'ya think yer doin with yer weakass skills, takin me on? Go take'a nap]

Right after striking a fighting pose, full of spirit, Otto instantly crumbled when Garfiel, suddenly coming up to him, gave him a flick in the forehead.

The flick — or more accurately, the close-range middle finger strike, with what sounded like tremendous force, sent Otto's wiry body flying off of the coachman's platform. Holding his forehead in what looked like agony, he passed out without a word. Regardless of whether he was dead or alive, he was no longer an obstacle.

[Garfiel: Now, by th'looks of it, yer the only one left]

Snorting, the punk turned with a sharp look that could cut a man in half, murmuring.

Standing on the coachman's platform, the distance between him and Subaru was only about four paces — but considering the way he had instantly closed his distance with Otto, there might as well be no distance between them at all.

Gasping down his breath, Subaru racked his brain but could not think of a single plan to break through. The only fighting force that might have been able to resist this man, Emilia, was still unconscious after her inexplicable collapse. But no matter what happens, he must protect her.

[Subaru: I'm.....]

[Garfiel: "Flip it this way or that yer skin's still blue", I don't wanna hear it——!]

With the sound of a light tap on the floor, in the blink of an eye, Garfiel's short figure appeared in front of Subaru's face. Above, the raised arm had its five fingers spread open, and it was easy to imagine the future where the claws would swing down, ripping his stunned body apart.

And in the face of that future where his limbs would be ripped apart, there was only one thing Subaru could think to do: to prevent the damage from reaching Emilia in his arms, and to protect her with his life.

[———!]

——A few seconds passed, or perhaps it was longer.

His eyes tightly shut, shielding Emilia with his entire body, the time Subaru spent waiting for the shock to come dragged on to the point of confusion. Then, hesitantly opening his

eyes, he found the five fingers spread out motionless in front of his face. Behind it, there was a perplexed look in the punk's eyes.

Keeping his gaze on Subaru, who could not help but hold his breath, he twisted his own head from side to side, making loud cracking noises with the bones in his neck.

[Garfiel: Instead of striking back y'prioritized protectin' the girl, the hell was that. After yer dead she'll be next anyway. Wasn't that a terrible decision?]

Being hit with a sound argument that he really didn't want to hear, Subaru, going through all sorts of reasons, couldn't come up with a reply. The silence making him even more displeased, Garfiel waved his sharp-clawed hand.

[Garfiel: Well, yer too slow anyway. Make a move or not, there probably wasn't much hope. You're all pretty useless either way]

[Subaru: Y, you are.....]

[Garfiel: Hah?]

Remarking on their ineptitude, Garfiel gave out his merciless assessment. And as Subaru was trying to move his frozen throat, attempting to squeeze out a question, Garfiel's vicious-looking face twisted up with displeasure, and moved in even closer to Subaru's face.

[Garfiel: You're whisperin, gotta speak up. C'mon]

[Subaru: You are Garfiel..... correct? You are acquainted with Roswaal and Frederica?]

[Garfiel: ——Frederica?]

Confirming Subaru's word, for the first time, Garfiel's expression lost its aggression. Looking astounded, like a carnivorous beast that had lost the scent of blood, for an

instant, he seemed almost cute and tame, but, immediately concealing it again with a bitter expression,

[Garfiel: Why d'ya know that name No, wait. That woman you're holdin', is the silver haired..... Half-Witch?]

[Subaru: She's a Half-Elf. Don't you dare use that name in front of her]

[Garfiel: ——Hyah. Whatsthiswhatsthis, y'got some spirit got allofasudden]

Glancing down at Emilia, Subaru suddenly exploded back at the utterance of that derogatory name. The fear of moments before all disappeared in the face of pure rage, and Garfiel, hearing this, clicked his fangs together noisily, full of glee.

[Garfiel: Say, isntshe that rumored Emilia-sama? Now, a “Half-Witch” showing up around here could only have everything to do with Roswaal]

[Subaru: Son of a.....]

Ignoring Subaru's previous words, Garfiel said “Half-Witch” again with special emphasis. Hearing this, Subaru stood up, but was immediately stopped by Garfiel's hand.

[Garfiel: “The dumbass who bites on molten iron only gets hurt” right. You don have a chance against me. Look at the difference in strength eh? ——I don't want you to get hurt, y'know?]

Making a fist with his outstretched hand, he cracked his knuckle-bones as a warning. Their respective strengths are obvious, without knowing his intentions, it's better not to make things any worse by resisting. To press down his anger and wait for another chance to get his revenge, would be the wisest course of action.

That's why,

[Subaru: ...Eat shit]

[Garfiel: Hah?]

[Subaru: I don't want to get hurt. And you'll beat me up pretty easily I guess. But. ——I can't stand by while you continue to say things that will make this girl sad]

Gently laying Emilia down on the luggage stand, lightly touching the hair on her forehead, Subaru stood up staring at Garfiel at a distance so close that their foreheads almost touched. A distance within each other's breaths, a distance within each other's reach.

[Subaru: Take back that bullshit name... and never use it again]

[Garfiel:You want me to do what you say? But you don't got what it takes, do you? Your face, your gut, your shin, you want them all to get wrecked, yeah?]

[Subaru: Go ahead and try. But don't expect me to go down for free, though... If you punch my face I'll bite you, if you strike my gut I'll grab you, if you hit my shin I'll spit on you, and I will be paying you back tooth for tooth]

Responding to intimidation with intimidation, Subaru was carried up by the surge passion burning in his chest. In front of him, the hostile aura quietly emanating from Garfiel sent shivers circling all over his body. Quite literally, Subaru could be flicked away in a second if Garfiel wanted to. Judging from his offense and defense so far, this was all too obvious.

Of the strongest people Subaru had met in this Parallel World up to now, Garfiel might easily hold a place among them. Perhaps without reaching the level of Reinhardt at the pinnacle, he could, nevertheless, conceivably take on Wilhelm or Julius.

So even as Subaru's words took back a little bit of ground, the probability of him actually retaliating was really equal to zero.

But still, Subaru and Garfiel stared squarely into each other's eyes.

Even knowing he will lose, he refused to back down... because the reason he cannot back down was just behind him...

[Garfiel: ——Hihaha]

[Subaru: ——Hah?]

...It was an unexpected voice that sounded completely out of place.

In the middle of their standoff, Garfiel's laugh leaked out, cutting into the space between them. Subaru let out a confused groan, and Garfiel responded with his action,

[Garfiel: Hiyahahaha! Yer prettygood with words eh. Y'reallydiditdidntyler!]

[Subaru: Wha..... Ow! Hey, wha wait, ow, st-, ow that really hurts!]

Breaking out into a wide laugh that shook his shoulders, Garfiel heartily patted Subaru in the shoulder. But even without the slightest hint of hostility or intention to attack, and even as he was holding back, the gesture, purely seeking friendly contact, was nevertheless cutting down Subaru's health points in large chunks at a time.

[Garfiel: G'job, y'passed! Went straight through! Th'Half-Witch..... Half-Elf, though I don't like'em much, you have guts protectin her, I'll respect that]

[Subaru: It's good you came around..... But it really hurts! When are you going to stop patting me? Are you trying to kill me!?!]

His enthusiasm unabated, Garfiel's arm dropped, and Subaru moved a bit further away. Seeing this, the punk tilted his neck, then crossed his powerful arms, and,

[Garfiel: So cold. All that stuff is water under th'bridge now, so c'mon and forget it already. When a man acts petty it means his thing is petty too, y'know]

[Subaru: That's the first time I heard you use an idiom that sounds familiar..... but my thing is totally none of your business! A-n-y-w-a-y!]

Garfiel shook around a little and gestured with his finger. But seeing him lift up his chin looking smug, Subaru threw his words back at him roughly.

[Subaru: You're Garfiel, and acquainted with Roswaal, right? Even though we had a fright when we came into contact all of a sudden, there's no more hostility between us now, right?!]

[Garfiel: Will ya quit making a fuss, it's getting annoying. Don't panic I won't eat ya]

[Subaru: Who do you think will believe that after that savage attitude a moment ago haaaah.....?]

Sticking his fingers in his ears with irritation, Garfiel responded to Subaru's objections with a [Y'got a point I guess] as if understanding him. Even though he's incomprehensible sometimes, it's a great relief to see that they can communicate with words. And then, having escaped the dire circumstances, Subaru remembered,

[Subaru: Yeah..... Hey this is no time for that! Emilia collapsed all of a sudden, what am I doing talking normally just now]

[Garfiel: Collapsed, y'mean the Half-Elf? Oy, of course she collapsed. Where do you think this is? What you panickin' about?]

Rushing over to Emilia's side, he found her still asleep and breathing irregularly, as if in pain. As Subaru was worrying by her side, Garfiel didn't seem to think much of it, and only shrugged. Noticing his knowing expression, Subaru asked [What do you mean?], which brought an incredulous frown onto Garfiel's face,

[Garfiel: Y'already heard from Roswaal and Frederica what this place was, right? They must have..... No way, y'don't know?]

Even as he was just beginning to explain, Subaru shook his head from side to side, and Garfiel clicked his tongue in frustration. Spitting out [Th'pervert bastard.....], it was easy to see who that insult was referring to.

[Garfiel: Frederica didn't say anything either? That's messed up, before y'know it her personality'll become like her owner's. Hopeless]

Shaking his head, Garfiel snorted out in irritation. Then, noticing Subaru's questioning eyes, he raised up his hand and said [Yeah I gettit I gettit], and,

[Garfiel: It looks pret'bad, but her life's in no danger. Only, if you don't want to see any more of that pain on her face, we needa get goin' right away. I'll guide you up to th'village]

[Subaru: When we move from here, her consciousness will return?]

[Garfiel: That's what I been sayin' isn't it. Hurry up, we're gonna go, oy, how long are ya gonna keep sleepin? Get up]

Even though there wasn't much explanation, Garfiel didn't seem intent on explaining further. Turning around without even trying to conceal his thuggish expression, he went out and gave Otto a kick. Receiving the kick, the "still-passed-out" Otto let out a painful yelp [A-uu].

[Garfiel: Yer the driver aren't yer, son of'a. I'll set the turned'over carriage upright, and y'drive it up to the village. If yer slow I'll kick yer ass flying, yeah?]

[Otto: Say, what's with this situation!? Following what I just heard, I get the feeling I'm just on the losing end of everything!]

Hearing this unacceptable version of things, Otto boiled, suddenly standing up to voice his objection to Garfiel. Considering the beating he got just a few minutes ago, this must have seemed tremendously courageous, and Garfiel, who appeared to share this opinion, turned to look at Subaru,

[Garfiel: Oy. This guy, is he always such an energetic bastard?]

[Otto: If you ask that guy there's no way you'll get a proper appraisal so please stop that! Can't you just make your own observation of what I am! And apologize! Please apologize!!]

[Garfiel: Hah!? The hell, son of'a bitch's healthy lively all of'a sudden, ya underestimin' me? Yeah I beat up a guy that didn't need a beatin', get over it!]

[Subaru: Can the two of you shut up! Emilia is still in pain, hurry up and grab the reins! And you, get the dragon carriage upright!]

While the three men were making a commotion, and started cursing at each other on the coachman's stand... placed aside on the luggage bed, Emilia, who had been unconsciousness up to now, still didn't wake up. However, a faint frown was stirring up on her pretty face, irritated by the noise,

[Emilia:Shut up]

She murmured in a little voice, as if talking in her sleep.

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[Garfiel: Didn't introduce m'self did I? Name's Garfiel..... Ah, just Garfiel 's good. The strongest man alive. Need anything, just ask]

[Subaru: Oh, I'm Natsuki Subaru Eh? What was that? You said you're the strongest? Are you saying that sober?]

As the dragon carriage got moving, sitting face-to-face inside, Subaru and Garfiel exchanged their self-introductions. Seeing Subaru suddenly pull back his outstretched hand with an astonished look, Garfiel also took on an incredulous expression,

[Garfiel: Isn't that what I said? What's so strange 'bout that?]

[Subaru: No no, I just never expected to meet someone who'd straight-out say "I'm the strongest man alive". Even so, isn't saying that going a bit too far?]

[Garfiel: Y'don't think I'm fit to be the strongest?]

[Subaru: Well you're very strong I'll admit, but if you're talking about the absolute strongest, how should I say it..... No matter what, I have a guy who always comes to mind]

The form of that red-haired Knight emerged in his thoughts... compared to Garfiel in front of his eyes, Subaru's mind tried to work it out. From their previous exchange, with just his bare hands, Garfiel was a formidable fighter, and could kick a house flying if he wanted to—— No, he had flipped the carriage upright with a stamp of his foot just now. But would all this be enough to contend with the Sword Saint, after all?

Even with this in mind, Reinhard's advantage doesn't seem to disappear, and Subaru himself wasn't exactly sure why he held that Knight in such special regard.

[Garfiel: Hah, as you like. I'll correct your mistaken view sooner or later, and prove with my own hands that I'm the strongest. For now, let's just say "Th'red nosed sea-lion's afraid o'th'cold", and think of it like that]

[Subaru: I totally don't know what you just told me to think about.....]

Subaru tilted his neck at that last part, and Garfiel didn't seem to be planning to explain it, and instead crossed his hands behind his head and relaxed his weight onto the back of

his seat. Anyway, their conversation having come to an end, Subaru looked out the window, and brushed his fingers through Emilia's silver hair as she slept in his lap. While Emilia has not woken up, her expression had become more restful than before. Just as Garfiel said, moving away from that place seemed to have a positive effect. So then, the next thing on his mind was,

[Subaru: Ah, I didn't get a chance to properly ask before but, you're a close acquaintance of Roswaal..... aren't you?]

[Garfiel: You must've heard my reputation, right? I'll say this one more time then, out of all the people associated with Roswaal, I'm by far the strongest]

[Subaru: That's not really the point..... But I do remember hearing you are an influential person, though]

Unless brute-force was the only reason he was considered "Influential"? Unlike what Subaru had expected, Garfiel was not much of a supporter in the political sense, but would perhaps be more of a supporter in the muscle-brained sense.

With the Sanctuary not far ahead, picking up someone who he at once needed to be cautious of, and who he could have friendly interactions with, really only added to the headache.

[Subaru: That's just more questions I'll need to ask Roswaal at the "Sanctuary" I guess. You know I'm supposed to be solving problems, but it feels like the number of questions just gets more and more as I go, what's with this?]

Hugging his own head, seeing the difficult road ahead just getting more difficult, Subaru's expression clouded over. Listening to this, Garfiel made a small click with his tongue, revealing just a small glimpse of his sharp canine teeth,

[Garfiel: "Sanctuary"— eh]

Sensing some meaning in his murmur, Subaru's face raised up, and Garfiel gently waved his hand. Then, he stood up, facing the direction ahead, ——that is, towards direction of the Sanctuary.

[Garfiel: It's because you're gulping down Roswaal's words whole without a second thought, that you keep callin' it by that name. Things you don't know aside, the things he did tell you are all full of shit y'know that right?]

[Subaru: Even though I have the same opinion, it's not good to gossip behind someone's back..... Say, did he piss you off or something?]

Garfiel became visibly displeased upon hearing the word "Sanctuary". Subaru wondered if he misspoke, and waited, but the reaction was more extreme than he anticipated.

That is, Garfiel twisted his mouth into an ironic smile that did not seem to fit,

[Garfiel: Well well, it's about time the princess-sama wakes up now. Since we're pretty far from the barrier]

[Subaru: What's the barrier..... Ah, Emilia-tan?]

Just as he was about to ask his question, Subaru saw Emilia turning over in his lap and called out to her. She opened her eyes faintly, and looked around the inside of the carriage hazily. As though she wasn't completely awake yet, she stared at Subaru with her violet eyes,

[Emilia: Morning, Shubaru.....] **(not a typo :3)*

[Subaru: Just waking up is suuuper cute, Emilia-tan, but maybe now's not a good time. How are you feeling, does your head hurt?]

[Emilia: Ehh, not at all? I don't feel strange or anything.....!]

In the middle of her answer Emilia suddenly became wide awake, and got up so fast that Subaru had to dodge his head backward. After being an inch away from banging their heads together, Subaru looked back at Emilia, who didn't seem to have noticed how close it came,

[Emilia: A,are you alright, Subaru? I said I will protect you but I passed out.....]

[Subaru: I managed it somehow, so there's no need to worry! We came to an understanding through dialogue. People form ties with each other through conversation, and we took the first step in that regard. Though I ran into some communication problems at first.....]

As Emilia was shoving closer and closer, Subaru touched her shoulder to try to calm her, while observing her as he spoke. It seems she could stand and walk, and the movements of her eyes and the color of her complexion, and her words and her voice were all impeccable. Also, super cute. Just like always.

[Garfiel: Right? Just like I said, yeah?]

And, as if waiting for Subaru to settle down, Garfiel laughed. But hearing this, Emilia suddenly jumped up in surprise, protecting Subaru behind her, as if only just now noticing the existence of this new stranger in the carriage.

[Emilia: ——Who are you!? I warn you, I won't let you lay a single finger on Subaru]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, it's alright! Also would you please stop reinforcing my role as the female-lead please! My gauge can't take much more of it!]

Pulling Emilia out of her combat mode from behind, Subaru turned to Garfiel and introduced him,

[Subaru: That's Garfiel..... Right after Emilia-tan collapsed, he atta..... I mean came to ride on the carriage. Not that he's welcome or anything, but he's coming along until we get to the "Sanctuary"]

[Emilia:This is Garfiel? The person Frederica mentioned?]

[Garfiel: Well I am curious what she said about me, but we can put that off till later. Look, we're coming up to th'village soon]

Hearing Emilia make the exact same comment as Subaru did earlier, Garfiel jerked up his chin without giving them time to organize the situation. He gestured, and ahead of them, the forest was opening up, and the form of the village that was their destination came into view——

[Garfiel: Be welcome, Emilia-sama and her entourage]

He addressed them with proper title —— however, his words did not contain any of the respect or favor, and had instead been served with more of a color of disdain, and a tinge of darkness.

Without realizing it, Subaru's gaze had turned severe, and confusion had emerged in Emilia's. Receiving both their gazes, Garfiel opened his arms wide, his attitude unchanged,

[Garfiel: The place Roswaal calls the "Sanctuary" or whatnot—— where half-wits are gathered to spend their days, in the impasse that is the Experimental Grounds, each to their pitiful ends]

[Subaru: Experimental Grounds.....?]

[Emilia: Half-wit——]

While Subaru and Emilia are each drawn to a different part, Garfiel placed a hand over his mouth covering his canine teeth which were showing, smiling, as if to conceal a terribly complicated feeling.

[Garfiel: But we, the residents, call it "The Witch of Greed's Gravesite". Laughable, yeah? Heh...]

Echoes of laughter, as if in self-derision, quietly resounded in the car.

Low, and faint, like a curse, like a blessing, it resounded throughout.

Listening, Subaru only silently worried about the girl next to him.

If a Witch stands in front of her path again, he must be the one to put out the flames... firmly and resolutely, he told himself.

The "Sanctuary" approaches.

——To Natsuki Subaru, and to Emilia, it was to be a place that will alter their paths forever.

Chapter 8 [The Long-Awaited Reunion]

Even traveling on an unpaved road, there was hardly any turbulence within the dragon carriage. No matter how many times he experiences it, he'd always find the effects of this "Divine Protection" incredible.

If all this was just the effects of the Divine Protection of "Wind Evasion", he wondered what if he could unwind the effects of all the other Divine Protections, and whether he would be using some other word besides "incredible" to describe them then.

[Subaru: ...or something, but this isn't the time to be running away from reality, is it]

Subaru poked his head out into the driver's area beside Otto, looking forward—— with the "Sanctuary" ahead, he focused his eyes on the sight.

Finally treading on earthen road that was no longer covered by grass, about a hundred something meters away, the forest was opening up. Some wooden rooftops were now visible in the distance, for they must have been the many surrounding residences the "Sanctuary". From far away, it looked rather like a run-down village, and there seemed to be nothing about it particularly worth noting.

And if one had to make a remark, perhaps it would be,

[Subaru: There's a dreary atmosphere about the place.....]

Standing in the entryway to the "Sanctuary" was a tremendously old gate made of stone that only served to emphasize that desolate imagery, and the short wooden fences surrounding the village gave off an impression of a locked cell.

Inadvertently, Subaru allowed his thoughts to slip through his lips, and Garfiel, listening, smacked himself in the knee,

[Garfiel: Pret'much! Dreary place, yeah? I'll say this first, the insides're even more dreary y'know? No matter who it is, there's no liveliness inside, they're all alive but might as well be dead]

[Subaru: Sounds pretty crappy the way you described it. But the more I listen the less it sounds like a "Sanctuary". That's just.....]

Seeing Garfiel enthusiastically affirm his ironic comment, Subaru sighed, and thought back on his previous words. To Subaru and the others who were calling this place “Sanctuary”, Garfiel did not hide a sense of self-deprecation as he spoke. So then——
[Emilia: “The Witch of Greed’s Gravesite”... what does that mean?]

The same question that came into Subaru’s mind seemed to have also arrived in Emilia’s. As she suddenly voiced this question her eyes became resolute, but down below, she was gently tugging on the hem of Subaru’s clothing with her fingertips. The fact that she was relying on him gave him a small sense of contentment, but Subaru’s feelings were complicated as he sensed the source of her anxiety.

[Subaru: The Witch——So basically, as the existence referred to by the name of “Witch”, the Witch of Envy is known to everyone. But the Witches bearing the names of the other Sins, there’s almost nothing known about them, right?]

[Emilia: Eh, really? But, weren’t they a bunch of really famous people from 400 years ago?]

[Garfiel: Emilia-sama’s not entirely mistaken. But yeah, Subaru’s got it. The Witch of Envy’s just way too famous, there’s no confusion ‘bout that. But of th’records of the other Witches eaten by the Witch of Envy, there’s barely a whiff left of ‘em. Though there are exceptions]

[Emilia: Just like here... right?]

After answering Subaru, Garfiel pulled in his jaw at Emilia’s question, smirking. As if quite affected by this, Emilia’s eyes widened, but Subaru, not well-informed on the matters surrounding the Witch, only let out an [Is that so...] as if understanding.

But a sudden notion surged in his mind that blew away that casual air. Because, if there are multiple Witches...

[Subaru: T, that doesn’t mean there’s a Witch Cult for every Witch, does it? Just beating down one Sin Archbishop was tough enough, come on give me a break]

It was a chilling thought, and one he couldn’t overlook.

Reading into the details of Petelgeuse’s words, he imagined they must all have been worshippers of the Witch of Envy. Likewise, “Gluttony” and “Greed” who Subaru must one day defeat, and their followers too, must all be in the same category as well.

Yet, if there are sects that worship the other Witches——

[Otto: It's a scary thing to be saying, but there's no need to worry about that, Natsuki-san]

But the one who banished the chill running up Subaru's spine, was the one holding the reins in front, Otto. In the end, compared to Emilia, who knows almost nothing about the Witch Cult, and unlike Garfiel, who was just not quite trustworthy, Otto actually held some kind of credibility, and could provide some insight into the common understanding of things. Because the extent of Otto's knowledge... was probably exactly what an average person would know.

[Otto: The Witch Cult..... even though I don't like to say it out loud, only worships the Witch of Envy. To revere another Witch above the Witch of Envy, only a lunatic would do that]

[Subaru: Above the Witch of Envy.....? What do you mean? Are they even worse than the Witch of Envy?]

[Otto: When they hear the name of another Witch other than the Witch they worship, the Witch Cultists will do some very frightening things. You heard of the city that was destroyed in the Southern Empire of Volakia, right?]

As Otto suddenly brought up the new topic, Subaru remembered having heard it before. After the battle against Petelgeuse, Wilhelm had mentioned it as he laid out the horrors of the Witch Cult. Certainly it was,

[Subaru: It was the Sin Archbishop of "Greed" who single-handedly destroyed that city in the what's-its-name Empire, wasn't it? I heard that even the nation's Champion couldn't do anything to stop him]

[Otto: I don't recall anything so fantastic, but the reason the Witch Cult did it in the first place was even more frightening. In the isolationist Volakian Empire, that was the only city where trade was prospering..... at the time there were rumors of a Witch-related artifact being unearthed there]

[Subaru: Related to the Witch, huh]

[Otto: What it was is unclear even now. Only, there were lots of collectors out there who were after it. It'd be fine if it was just for some sick sense of humor, wanting to collect

something belonging to the Witch of Envy..... but in the end, the entire city perished because of it]

Perhaps it was to obtain that artifact, or to destroy it, that “Greed” made his move. The Volakian Empire had mistakenly roused the Witch Cult and received this catastrophic retribution as a result.

[Otto: After that, even things unrelated to the Witch of Envy, anything that might possibly provoke the Witch Cult is prohibited by decree..... but even so, it still didn’t stop these items from circulating in shameless behind-the-scenes dealings]

[Subaru: It’s rare to hear that kind of spite from you. It almost sounds you were involved?]

[Otto:It’s nothing worth mentioning. Just back then, some of my relatives were caught up in the city when it happened. It’s been more than 15 years now, I was just a child back then so it didn’t have much to do with me]

After that, Otto closed his mouth and refused to go any further on the topic. Seeing his attitude, Subaru stopped asking, and turned his gaze and attention back into the carriage. In any case, Garfiel was waiting for Subaru to finish processing everything he’s learned, saying [Satisfied now?] while holding his chin in his hand.

[Garfiel: I don’t know the finer points either. But Granny keep goin’ on and on about how it’s the “Witch of Greed’s Gravesite”, like how “Peromeo rots jus’from th’listenin”, repeated s’many times, t’can’t be wrong]

[Subaru: All you know is what the rot-guy told you? So you don’t really know the details either, huh]

[Garfiel: Only thing I care’bout is me being th’strongest. If y’want to know the specifics go grab Roswaal by th’collar and ask’im yerself. N’sure if y’can do it now, though]

[Subaru: ——? What’s that supposed to mea.....]

[Otto: Um sorry. It seems we’ve arrived, do we just go in like this?]

Before he could sort out Garfiel’s seemingly loaded words, Otto’s voice hailed from the coachman’s stand in front. Against Otto’s call, Garfiel grumbled [Welp], and nimbly hopped off the carriage.

[Garfiel: If y'go in w'thout sayin'anything, they'll take ya for outside intruders an'coord'nate a mass'assault on ya, it'll be all like'a "laughin Magmarin full o'holes". I'll go in an'tell'em first, y'guys wait here]

[Subaru: Ah, we'll leave it to you then. Hey, come to think of it, I get the feeling like you're the patrol for the Sanctuary or something. Considering the way we ran into each other at first...]

On the other hand, the way he seemed to have abandoned his post in the end didn't quite fit that idea. And the fact that he was patrolling alone, too. But then again, with strength like his, perhaps moving alone was more efficient.

But to Subaru's last question, Garfiel only lightly waved his hand without answering. Unable to see through him, Subaru's brows furrowed, and, almost at the same time, Emilia let out an [Ah] in a slightly elevated voice.

Turning his eyes to Emilia, who had cried out involuntarily, he saw her pointing ahead. And, following her finger, Subaru immediately understood her surprise as he saw what she had seen. Because standing there, was,

[—You're back, Garfiel. Pretty early, isn't it]

[Garfiel: 'Cus there's no need t'circle in th'forest anymore. It's gotta be rare t'see you leave Roswaal's side though. He fin'lly dropped dead?]

[Ram: If that is so, this place, Ram will already have burned it down with her own hands in self-abandon. You have Roswaal-sama to thank that this is not the case]

[Garfiel: That'some incredible logics, I can't understand it at all!]

Dressed in the familiar maid's uniform, the girl's peach-colored hair was swaying as she faced Garfiel. Unlike Garfiel, who was happily smiling, her expression seemed cold and without emotion. Taking a long time to confirm this, Subaru's shoulders dropped as if relieved.

[Otto: Haaa, so that's the older sister I heard so much about. I see... Of course this is only natural, but she looks exactly like the young miss who's sleeping]

And having seen her for the first time, Otto let out this remark. In front of their eyes, she looked like a perfect replica of the Rem Otto had seen, but only, inside, it was a completely different person.

For this, was the long-awaited reunion with the good-for-nothing maid of the Roswaal Mansion, Ram.

[Subaru: ——Ram!]

Sticking his body out of the dragon carriage, Subaru waved to Ram. Her eyes slightly squinted as she saw him, and, quite understandably, she shrugged and shook her head.

[Ram: I humbly do not know where Barusu popped out from, but your late arrival is certainly disappointing. You should have noticed sooner that something had gone wrong and..... ah, but that's too much for Barusu's abilities, after all]

[Subaru: If you're going to use a phrase like "I humbly do not know", stick with that tone all the way and don't change it all of a sudden! And Roswaal too, I can't understand what you guys are thinking, but I'll definitely have something to say when I get a hold of him!]

Objecting, Subaru pointed a finger at the girl whose attitude had not changed at all.

Seeing this reaction from Subaru, Ram dropped her shoulders, before turning to Emilia, who was standing beside him.

Relieved to see that Emilia, same as Subaru, was safe, Ram's face relaxed. And for a brief moment, in her eyes, Subaru thought there was a fleeting, almost dreamlike glimpse of sorrow. Yet, in that same instant, it had already vanished.

[Ram: Emilia-sama too, welcome. Roswaal-sama is waiting, so please come with me to the inner building. Garfiel, go find a suitable place for the dragon carriage and the driver]

[Garfiel: What's with that treatment, oy! Can't y'ask for help in a way that inspires more enthusiasm?]

[Ram: If you want to eat Ram's hand-made meal, please strive to do your best. But if you want to throw away this valuable opportunity because of your careless words, Ram won't say anything more]

[Garfiel: Alright! Alright already! Can't grab a hold o'her at'all, though it's good like that. Oy, asshole driver. Park the ground dragons an'the carriage at the end there an'come wit me]

[Otto: It's about time I introduced myself right!? Could you please not call me with that insulting name!? Also, isn't it a bit dangerous for me to be left alone with this guy!]

As Otto voiced his objection at Garfiel, who had just been vanquished by Ram, Subaru, seeing this, shot him a thumbs-up with teeth sparkling,

[Subaru: I'll recover your bones!]

[Otto: That was definitely something said with good intentions but carries the completely wrong implications isn't it!? Really, if anything happens to me I'm going to claim for compensation!]

Leaving behind these words, Otto, having let Subaru and Emilia off of the dragon carriage, followed after Garfiel. Seeing them start off toward the interior of the village, Subaru rubbed Patrasche in the nose in a reluctant goodbye. Then, turning with a snap of his neck, saying [Now then],

[Subaru: There's a whole array of things I want to ask and talk to you about, now that we're here can we finally talk?]

[Ram:Ram hasn't been granted permission to convey anything to you. You can ask Roswaal-sama directly when you meet him. Though I don't know how much Garf had let slip already]

[Subaru: Garf..... ah, you mean Garfiel. That guy turned out to be a whole lot different from the impression I got from just hearing his name. Come to think of it, there's something that's been bothering me]

[Ram: What is it?]

Sharply, Ram furrowed her brows. Imagining it might be information Roswaal had given express instructions not to reveal, her gaze became serious, but, seeing this, Subaru let out a [Naah it's just], as he folded his arms,

[Subaru: That guy, does he have a crush on you? I got that feeling from the way he was talking]

[Ram:And here I was wondering what you were going to say]

Unable to hide her genuine astonishment, Ram sighed. Only, seeing how she didn't deny it, Subaru couldn't help but let out an out-of-place grin.

[Subaru: Well I'm not saying he has strange tastes but. You look cute..... but the fact that he still likes you after being around you for so long, I think he must have some serious resolve]

[Ram: Being gifted with both intelligence and beauty, males will inevitably be attracted to Ram, there's nothing I can do about that. But, Ram has already devoted her all to someone who she shall always stay devoted to, so I have no wish for such things] With a sway of her shoulders, Ram responded to Subaru's sarcastic words, and, in a single stroke, she had cut down all of Garfiel's hopes with her response. Then, turning her back to Subaru and Emilia, she left the words [Come with me], as she immediately took her step forward.

Although he wasn't exactly trying to make the flowers of love bloom, her cold attitude still made Subaru feel like he was coming away empty handed. But, the fact that he could not ask what he should have asked, was, understandably, because he was afraid.

[Subaru: At a time like this, am I still too much of a coward to say Rem's name... even though I want to... even...]

He was terrified of the confirmation.

Having already heard it from Emilia and Petra that they cannot remember Rem, now, to ask her own sister whether she has forgotten her existence too?

But, having come here, the fact that she did not ask about Rem's absence, already meant that there was no point in asking anymore.

[Subaru: Can't help but cave-in to her either way. Then let's follow Ram for now, Emilia-tan. —What's wrong?]

Subaru turned to Emilia, who had kept her silence up to now. Ever since stepping off the carriage, she had not opened her mouth, but only looked around at her surroundings anxiously. Noticing Subaru's call, she let out a [No...] slightly shaking her head.

[Emilia: It's just, I can't seem to calm down. How should I say it, there's a strange feeling..... it's not something I can put into words]

[Subaru: Can't calm down, huh. For me, a shy loner who's reluctant to even leave the house, all this is like a new world you know? Everyone gets this feeling I think..... In fact, I don't particularly hate it myself]

Looking around along with Emilia, everything looked very much like the image of a run-down village. Perhaps, compared to Arlam village, the houses appeared older, and in a greater state of disrepair, but these were merely relative, insignificant details.

Nevertheless, the place was not without a certain sense of incongruity about it. Although what that incongruity was, Subaru wasn't quite sure either.

[Subaru: But we don't have much choice even if we keep our guards up, Emilia-tan. Ram and Ros-chi are both here, so at least we shouldn't be in any danger, I think]

[Emilia: It's not that I'm keeping my guard up..... No, I'm ok now. But really, if only I could talk to Puck...]

The crystal stone at her chest——touching the green stone beneath her neck, Emilia called out anxiously to the name of the spirit sealed within. The absence of the great spirit that always stayed by her side obviously brought her anxiety to no end.

And to see her so fragile, Subaru despised himself for not being the existence that she can rely on.

[Emilia: ——Subaru?]

[Subaru: Let's go. No matter what happens, leave it to your #2 shield]

Without thinking, he grabbed the hand that was touching the crystal, and turned his face away as he said this. Then, holding her hand like this, before she could even say no, he swung out his stride. And naturally, Emilia only followed behind his forceful attitude.

Having done so without any consideration, just the thought of his embarrassing act made fire fly out of every pore of his face. But, much more than thought, he had chosen to follow his emotion, and merely hoped that this was not seen as strange.

[Emilia ——Ok]

Only, unlike Subaru's heart, which was about to jump out of his chest, Emilia slightly nodded, and did not let go of his hand.

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It was the only house in the Sanctuary that preserved some semblance of a proper shape.

Constructed out of stone, the single storey building was around the size of a single-family house of the original world. Its rooms arranged in a simple layout, one could almost imagine living an equally simple and cozy life here.

Although compared to the Roswaal Mansion and the Crusch Mansion, having grown accustomed to a certain standard of living, Subaru found it rather cramped. But, of course, in time, with a little bourgeois-spirit, he could easily grow used to living in such a place.

For this, was the impression of the place of their meeting.

So then,

[Roswaal: Yaaaa~~~, Emilia-sama and Subaru-kun. I~~ get the feeling that this is quite the long-awaited reunion, do~~n't you think hmm?]

With a carefree smile, and waving his hand at them, this was how Roswaal greeted them as they saw each other again.

After parting in the capital, this was the first time Subaru met face to face with Roswaal. And as they had not seen each other in the previous loops, it had actually been over a month. Considering all the pent-up resentment accumulated during that time, he had wanted to do nothing less than to punch him across the face at the earliest opportunity, but,

[Roswaal: Fi~rst of all, more than anything, it's so~ good to see you safe, Emilia-sama. Ram's already told me about the problems around the Ma~nsion. If anything should have happened to you, I would surely have lost the will to go on li~ving]

[Subaru: If that's what you feel, you should have at least made some better preparations..... Actually, more importantly, what the hell happened to you? What is this!?!]

Even as Roswaal seemed relieved to see Emilia safe, Subaru and Emilia were beside themselves with consternation. For all the countless things they had wanted to say, had all of a sudden vanished like a parting mist when they saw Roswaal.

Lying on the bed... all manner of wounds that cannot be overlooked littered his body, as blood seeped through the bandages constricting his figure into a pitifully painful posture.

At Subaru's question and Emilia's silent gaze, Roswaal used his left arm, which was relatively less injured, to gently pull up the eye-patch that was covering his left eye.

[Roswaal: Aaa~~~yaaa~~, a~~re you asking about these? I~~ am only a man, a~~fter all. Being seen in this pitiful state wounds my self-esteem, so if you could please understand my desire to re~~st a little]

[Emilia: That's not good enough, is it. What really happened, Roswaal? Getting wounded like this..... and how did you, of all people]

Not distracted by his jest, Emilia retorted as she extended a trembling finger towards him, hesitating whether to touch the body ridden with wounds. Seeing her do this, Roswaal smiled bitterly, and turned his right eye up to the ceiling, [Well then...] he whispered,

[Roswaal: Whe~~re should I~~ begin hm? We~ll, I guess you could say my injuries were sustained for something of a matter of honor, and out of regard for propriety, I had no~~ choice]

[Emilia: Stop trying to get away with these roundabout words. I am asking you seriously, Roswaal, so answer me seriously in return]

[Roswaal:My~ it seem Emilia-sama is in an especially bad mood. Bu~~t, considering where we are, there's no avo~iding it perhaps]

Even Subaru felt that something was out of place when he heard Emilia's relentless, inquisitive tone, and it was at the same moment, that Roswaal pointed this out. Emilia slightly angled up her eyebrows, but, realizing that what he had pointed out was true, she lightly bit her lip.

[Emilia: My head is all a mess, I can't calm down at all. What is this place? Even though it's called the "Sanctuary", I don't think that's what it is at all. Then this place is.....]

[Roswaal: "A Witch's Grave", that's an easier name to acce~~pt, no?]

[——!]

The tone of Roswaal's voice dropped as he pronounced these words. The same words from Garfiel being uttered in Roswaal's mouth, the phrase suddenly took on a sense of some heavy and sonorous meaning.

Swiftly, Emilia shot her gaze toward Subaru. Seeing the complex tangle of emotions in her eyes, Subaru lowered his chin in a nod, in tune with her unease.

[Subaru: Hold on, let's get everything we want to ask in order first. If we go on like this, the conversation is only going to drift all over, and we won't get a single conclusion out of him]

[Roswaal: Ooh~ yaaa? In the short time we haven't se~en each other, you've gotten quite good at se~tling accounts, no? Subaru-kun, just wha~t could have brought on this change in your state of mi~nd?]

[Subaru: If we're going to get into that it'll take a really long time, so I'll leave the bragging for after we've heard everything we want to know. Ah, right, there was just this one thing...]

Staring at Roswaal's mocking smile, Subaru lifted up a finger,

[Subaru: We've established the alliance with Crush-san, but you must have already heard it from Ram... you're glad you left me behind, aren't you?]

[Roswaal: ——Ve~ry glad. A~~fter all, I was right to have picked you up]

Seeing Roswaal relax the corner of his lips with satisfaction, Subaru sighed and closed his eyes. Subaru had anticipated this, but the fact remains, his actions were exactly as Roswaal planned. Even if he had already allowed himself to be used, it still wasn't fun to hear the confirmation.

Anyway, Subaru arranged his next thought,

[Subaru: Firstly then, the villagers of Arlam village. Since Ram is safe, they must be fine as well, and all evacuated safely, right?]

[Roswaal: You can rest assu~~red. Perhaps my current state doesn't give me much credibility but, I sti~~ll know my respo~nsibilities as Lord. Such thing as to risk my life to protect my subjects, I too have that resolve. I've seen to it that everyone's sheltered in the village's cathedral]

[Subaru: Cathedral... Ah, we can get back to that later, so the next thing is.....]

He was relieved to confirm the villagers' safety. Since Subaru had only made the decision to evacuate along with the preparations beforehand, whether they were safe in the end was the final concern left over from the previous loops. ——Because no matter what, a part of that could no longer be redone.

Relaxing his shoulders, Subaru gave Emilia a look. And receiving it, she inclined her head, drawing back her slender chin,

[Emilia: Then, tell me about this place. You call it Sanctuary, but Garfiel calls it “The Witch of Greed’s Gravesite”. Just which one is true?]

[Roswaal: Both are true, Emilia-sama. This is the site of the once-Witch of Greed’s ——Echidna’s final resting place. And to me personally, it is a place that should called Sanctuary]

[Subaru: ——Witch]

[Emilia: Echidna.....]

Hearing his answer, Subaru and Emilia’s throats simultaneously clogged up.

Roswaal spoke quietly, and all of the clownish demeanor he had been using until now had vanished from his voice. Precisely because of this, for the first time, his words carried an unmistakable flavor of honesty.

Drawing in a deep breath, Emilia blinked a few times, and continued once more,

[Emilia: The Witch of Greed.....was another Witch who was annihilated by the Witch of Envy, wasn’t she]

[Roswaal: E~n, that is right. No matter where you look in the history of the current world, nothing remains of her name anymore. Only, except in the memories of those who knew her...]

[Subaru: Wait wait wait, but what you just said makes no sense]

Subaru interrupted Roswaal's solemn words with a quick wave of his hand. Roswaal narrowed his single eye, gazing into Subaru, who was little by little succumbing to the pressure of his aura.

[Subaru: If I remember correctly, the Witch of Greed.....was defeated by the Witch of Envy 400 years ago. This place being the final resting place of a Witch from 400 years ago might be understandable..... but what you're saying is that you knew her in person, but that's just...]

[Roswaal: I~~ know this myself, but I~~'m afraid I can't say. Because this is passed down verbally through generation after generations of the Mathers family.....only to the heir of Roswaal]

[Emilia: Passed down verbally..... then the head of the Mathers family of long ago was once connected to the Witch of Greed?]

[Roswaal: ——Echidna]

[Emilia: Eh?]

Suddenly, hearing the name brought up, Emilia's eyes opened wide. Roswaal turned his gaze towards her, and, as if to confirm once more, quietly whispered, [Echidna],

[Roswaal: Ple~ase, call her by name when referring to her. A title like "The Witch of Greed", no matter you how say it, carries an evil impression about it, do~~n't you think? And it's so long, too...]

[Emilia: ...I see. So then, Echidna met her end in this village, and this village has then been managed by the Mathers family for generation after generation..... is that right?]

[Roswaal: E~n, that is correct. Though managing implies more hands on work tha~n there is. Echidna's influence remains thickly here, and without the proper steps, it'd be impossible to set foot in here. The fact that you were able to enter..... must have been thanks to Frederica's assistance, isn't that so?]

Receiving a nod of affirmation in return, a sense of understanding emerged in Roswaal's eyes. Seeing this, Subaru pursued the topic,

[Subaru: I understand this is Echidna's grave, and under your management. But what I don't understand is its purpose, and why you and the villagers haven't returned yet]

[Roswaal: I may have just said some strange things, bu~~t you seem to have accepted them quite rea~dily. The fact that this is a Witch's Gravesite, I~~ had really wanted to keep that a secret...]

[Subaru: Maybe if it was the Witch of Envy, but I really have no idea what the Witch named Echidna had done. Just the word "Witch" immediately gives the impression of some kind of villain. But then it's the same thing with "Half-Elf", and who could have guessed that Emilia-tan is so cute just from that word?]

[Emilia:D, d-don't say irrelevant things like that. Surprise-attacks are off limits you know!]

Hearing the pick-up line casually inserted into the end of that otherwise serious sentence, Emilia, whose face had turned bright red, lightly yanked at the side of Subaru's waist. Subaru smiled wryly at her totally cute retaliation, but then, he noticed Roswaal in the corner of his eyes giving off a rather annoying laugh [Oho~],

[Roswaal: In the sho~rt time you've spent apart, you've grown quite a bit closer, ha~ven't you. After leaving with that fight in the Capital, I was wondering just what would happen, but it seems now it's even better than befo~re]

[Subaru: That's the love received at the end of a long and arduous journey, you know! There's a mountain of things I can brag about, but let's leave that for after you've finished answering our questions. So, what is the purpose of this place, and why haven't you returned]

[Roswaal: It seems you aren't the naive child anymore, and has become quite dependable indeed. So~ then, the re~ason the villagers and I have not returned..... simply put, we can't return even if we wa~nted to]

[Subaru: Can't return even if you wanted to?]

Unable to understand his answer, Subaru furrowed his brows.

Roswaal nodded, and smiling at the question mark emerging on Subaru's face, said,

[Roswaal: Because right now, every o~ne of us, and the residents of this village included, are all in a state of house-arrest. A~~nd, from the moment you entered here, it seems you two are also in the sa~me situation]

Chapter 9 [The Graveyard]

[Subaru: House arrest now..... that's an unsettling word.....]

Facing Roswaal, who was lying on the bed, Subaru barely managed to wrench out these words while carefully analyzing the sentence which had just been spoken at him. Judging from the flow of the conversation, he might normally have laughed it off as a stupid joke, but unfortunately, in the current circumstances they appeared to be authentic. At any rate,

[Emilia: So then, does that mean the villagers here gave you these injuries?]

Emilia seemed to have arrived at the same opinion as Subaru on the general believability of his words.

Bound in bandages seeped in blood, Roswaal's body was in a pitiful state. Seeing him like this was at least proof that some of what he said was true, and was the reason why it could not simply be laughed off.

[Subaru: If there's someone in the village who could give such serious injuries to Roswaal, that means we're in a pretty serious situation.....]

Touching his hand to his jaw, while tracing over the respective strengths in his mind, Subaru felt a burning sense of unease in his chest.

The existence of Roswaal L. Mathers, besides being Subaru's patron in this parallel world, was a powerful magic user at a level only very few others could hope to reach.

In fact, the strength of the man who occupied the position of Head Magician of the Royal Court of Lugunica was such that even a hundred Subarus would not have a chance of winning against it, and could easily annihilate a horde of Mabeasts while humming. To think that he would end up in this state.....

[Roswaal: Ah, but it seems like you misundersto~od. My wounds weren't infli~~cted by~ anyone. There's no need to be on guard for anything strange, or plan any kind of revenge for my sake, o~k?]

[Subaru: Don't worry. You haven't saved up enough positive impressions for me to go off recklessly seeking revenge..... But more importantly, what is that supposed to mean?

That's different from what you just said. Aren't you supposed to be under house arrest.....]

[Roswaal: Considering that I'm injured and being restrained like this, calling it house arrest is not wrong, surely. It's not that I was injured in the process of being restrained, I was injured, and then restrained..... Though if I were to explain it in detail, it would be a little different]

In response to Roswaal's round-about manner of speaking, a question mark flew out of the top of Subaru's head. Breaking everything down, he managed to calm himself and sorted through the context of what was said, and in other words,

[Subaru: So the people of the sanctuary have nothing to do with your injuries, is that right?]

[Roswaal: Strictly speaking, one can't exactly say that they're unrelated, but if you were to ask me whether they were directly responsible for my injuries then the answer is no. In other words, that's how it is]

[Subaru: In other words, they're indirectly related then]

Roswaal inclined his head, and for a moment appeared to be embarrassed by Subaru's analysis. Then letting out a small sigh, [It's like watching a child grow up, I guess...], he joked.

Seeing that attitude, Subaru took it as a sign that he was coming closer to the truth.

Determined not to let up his questioning, he chose his next words and prepared to throw them at Roswaal, but...

[Ram: —Barusu, how about showing Roswaal-sama a little bit of care?]

Saying so, Ram, who had not been present until now, interjected herself into the conversation. With the hem of her skirt lightly swinging, the girl crossed the room with graceful steps, and placed the steaming set of tea she had been carrying on a tray neatly onto the table.

Its fragrance spread throughout the room, and with the stimulation of his olfactory senses, Subaru only now realized how inconsiderate he had been. For just when he was about to

pursue his questioning, he suddenly noticed just how severe Roswaal's wounds actually appeared.

[Ram: Pressing Roswaal-sama so hard when he's so severely injured, digging to the bottom of everything, are you satisfied? Look at Roswaal-sama suffering, almost crying, have some sympathy]

[Subaru: Just when you've made me reflect on my actions... don't say something that ruins the mood! I mean, is this supposed to be him hurting and about to cry? Doesn't look like it to me!]

[Roswaal: Uuuuh, it hu~~rts, I'm in pa~~in. Words lacking in kindness and concern hit me right in my woounds...]

So Subaru responded to Ram's words with a brash retort. As if mocking Subaru's remarks, Roswaal started a little performance on the bed. As Subaru's eyebrows started to twitch in annoyance, Emilia cleared her throat and pulled the room back from the turbulent atmosphere.

While drawing the eyes of all three people in the room to her, she started with an [In any case]

[Emilia: Anyone can tell that Roswaal isn't well just by looking, so let's finish this conversation quickly. You haven't had healing magic cast on you?]

[Ram: Magic that heals is outside of Ram's area of expertise, so.....]

In response to Ram's expressionless, yet somehow clearly regretful answer, Emilia looked at Roswaal with eyes which held only little expectation. Seeing this, Roswaal waved his raised hand from side to side,

[Roswaal: I too, am specialized in destruction magic yo~~u see. If it's to do with destroying, harming or deceiving I can generally do pretty much anything, but I'm hopeless when it comes to spells related to healing]

[Subaru: That's a sad way to put it. Rather than just offensive spells, you should make sure to practice with some defensive spells as well, jeez...]

That said, whenever Subaru played a game in which he had to decide on his character growth, he was the type of super offense-focused player who would only pick attack-oriented skills. So he couldn't scold Roswaal too harshly.

At the same time as when Subaru reached this strange acceptance, Emilia sighed [it can't be helped], and,

[Emilia: Puck isn't here so I'm not at my best, but I'll cast the healing magic. I have to concentrate while I do it though, so we'll have to finish talking first]

[Roswaal: The Great Spirit-sama...?]

Shocked at the information Emilia had just spilled, Roswaal quickly raised his eyebrows, then narrowed his eyes. That somewhat cold expression, unlike the usually relaxed demeanor, was one which Subaru had rarely seen. He unwittingly contracted his shoulders and said [Oy oy]

[Subaru: It's rare to see you with a serious expression. Is it so surprising that Puck isn't here? I hadn't realized that you were actually a closet mofumofu fur-enthusiast.....]

[Roswaal: Unfortunately, the only time I have gotten close enough to Great Spirit-sama to be able to touch it was when I respectfully offered it ma~yonna~~ise. It was really scary. ———Anyway, I~ see]

Without even ignoring Subaru's banter, Roswaal narrowed his brow in rumination. While doing this, he suddenly turned his yellow left pupil onto Emilia,

[Roswaal: Emilia-sama, you aren't feeling ill, or different from normal in a~~ny way, right?]

[Emilia:? Other than Puck not showing his face, not really. Puck not coming out started a little while before we reached the Sanctuary too, so... Ah, but there is one thing] Raising a finger as if asking a question, Emilia then proceeded to quickly whip her gaze around at their surroundings ———Not only inside of the room they were in, but seeming as if she was looking over the entirety of the Sanctuary outside of it, and after doing so, she said in a lowered voice,

[Emilia: Since entering the Sanctuary... No, maybe ever since entering the forest, I feel like the responses from spirits have become dull. And just now, when we were just outside, I..... felt a strange gaze on me]

[Subaru: A strange, gaze?]

Surprised at what he heard, Subaru inclined his head, to which Emilia responded [Yes] and pulled in her chin in confirmation. After explaining that this was the reason why her expression had darkened after they parted ways with Garfiel and the others earlier, she continued,

[Emilia: It felt like I was being stared at. It felt reeeaaally unpleasant... I thought it might just be me, so I didn't tell you]

[Roswaal: Neither of Emilia-sama's feelings are mistaken. This is a place which is unpleasant for the spirits, and further, its inhabitants harbor nothing but unpleasant feelings towards you]

In response to Emilia's anxious words, Roswaal poured out a stream of words devoid of any consideration. Seeing her eyes hurt and wavering, Subaru instantly turned on Roswaal and was about to open his mouth to object, but,

[Garfiel: Well, how 'bout y'leave it there. You shouldn't be so hard on'a wounded man. "Th'running spotted-beak's hot now" isn't it]

[Subaru: I guess that's true unfortunately... not that I'm understanding enough of that to say I agree. But this is just a tiny complaint, we've totally established a translatable communication between us, haven't we?]

Looking over his shoulder, Subaru shrugged as he saw Garfiel leaning against the door, baring his teeth. Seeing his reaction, Garfiel made a noise grinding his teeth, and looked around the room.

[Garfiel: Granny's home's supposed th'most spacious and proper one here, but with so many people, it gets cramped, huh. Guess I was right to leave that noisy guy behind]

[Subaru: Now that you mention it, I don't see Otto around... Did he go home? Did you eat him?]

Emilia looked shocked at Subaru's question, but Garfiel laughed out loud and slapped his knees, as if he'd just heard an amazing joke.

[Garfiel: I do have the blood of a carnivore, but I don't think I'd eat him. Especially 'cause that guy seems like he'd get even more noisy when I'm eating him. He said something about being worried about the dragon and the cart..... Well, he pretty much jus' came up with some excuse and legged it]

With one arm swinging, and strutting over brutishly, Garfiel plunked himself down on a chair near the wall, and looked up at Ram, who was watching him sideways,

[Garfiel: Tea]

[Ram: I will go outside to collect some fallen leaves, so will you please wait for me?]

[Subaru: Even though I have a suspicion, but, what will you be doing with those fallen leaves?]

[Ram: I have no intention of wasting precious tea leaves on the sort who has no understanding of neither fragrance nor taste. That is Ram's answer]

Having stated this in cold blood, Ram then earnestly went out the building. Pointing a finger up at Ram's back, Subaru looked at Garfiel, wordlessly asking [What do you like about her?] In response to that, while chasing her back with his look,

[Garfiel: Strong-willed women are worth the chase, ain't that so? And being a male, getting strongly attracted to excellent female ain't such a strange thing]

[Subaru: Stuff like males and females, we're not talking about telling chickens apart, so don't keep using that. In spite of everything, Ram is a proper young woman, you know. Calling her that.....]

[Garfiel: Huh? What're you sayin'? I'm treatin' her as properly as any woman could ask to be treated yeah? Also, before that we.....]

As Subaru offered his frank advice on his unusual way of speaking, Garfiel frowned as if he just noticed something, and raised his eyebrows. His face then took on a displeased expression, and he turned a gaze filled with swords onto Roswaal on the bed,

[Garfiel: Son of a, y'haven't told 'em yet? If it wer' jus' you gettin' crumpled I'd brush it off as a joke, but, since that Half-Elf..... since Emilia-sama's come here, it's a whole different matter]

[Emilia: ——Eh?]

Garfiel had put his annoyance to his tongue and stamped it out. Emilia was surprised at hearing her name come out in the middle of his remark. But, with no regard for her astonishment, Garfiel snapped at Roswaal with an expression that was even more overflowing with anger than before.

[Garfiel: The moment Emilia-sama entered the Sanctuary, we got caught up in this mess y'know. Watcha gonna do about it? Ya haven't even begun to go into the main issue here yet. Son of'a, did ya'll jus come here to fool around?]

The latter half of his anger wasn't just directed at Roswaal, but at Subaru and Emilia as well, who had also gone silent. Particularly, the rage dwelling in the look he aimed at Emilia was no laughing matter, and as if to protect her, who was pulling her shoulders closer together, Subaru stepped forward.

[Subaru: Hold on. I get that you're angry, but I don't even have a clue why. You'll just get more and more angry if you keep talking to someone who hasn't got a clue, right?]

[Garfiel: But that's what pisses me off. When the person all this is about ain't even got a clue.....]

[Subaru: But the one disregarding "the person all this is about" and talking over her head is you and Roswaal over there, isn't it? If you really are concerned with that problem and want to do something about it, fulfill your responsibility to explain it. Expecting us to get it without explaining anything makes you just as shameless as I was just a short while back you know]

As he was facing him, Subaru felt the pressure coming from Garfiel getting a whole level stronger. Garfiel's stature was smaller than Subaru's, and as he was currently sitting, the height difference was quite significant. In spite of this, the smallness of his stature was almost unnoticeable. No, considering the density of the pressure emanating from him, to Subaru, Garfiel appeared to be something like a massive boulder.

Knowing that Subaru was naturally chicken-hearted, averting his eyes and taking a step back would only have been expected,

But,

[Emilia: Subaru...]

Tightly, Subaru felt a delicate finger entangle itself onto his sleeve. The sound of a voice seemingly devoid of confidence calling him slid past his earlobes, and invested his trembling knees with renewed strength.

Emilia was standing behind him. Relying on him in her uncertainty.

As if he would really let his knees buckle in front of her, could he do something as lame as that?

[Garfiel: ——Tch]

They exchanged a stare in silence, and the first to avert his gaze was Garfiel. As he clicked his tongue, and entrusted his weight to the back of his seat, he stuffed his finger into his short, golden hair, and began to scratch at it violently.

[Garfiel: Aaah! I know, I was jus' takin' it out on you. I snapped, I said I'm sorry, oy!]

[Subaru: No, you haven't really said that. But before that, didn't anyone ever tell you you have a really annoying personality?]

As quick as he was to become emotional and shortsighted, he was just as quick to take back his rationality and acknowledge his faults. Subaru thought that personality must be so rough to have, and rather than indignation he put on a wry smile.

Seeing this, Garfiel let out an unbecoming sigh [Haaa],

[Garfiel: Shut up, I'll be quiet, so get the conversation going in the meantime, 'cause if I join in, the talk ain't gonna go nowhere and it'll become annoying]

[Subaru: The fact that you've analyzed yourself this well, but then went all the way around without changing anything... I find that pretty amazing]

[Garfiel: Complimentin' me's pointless, since I don't really understand complicate things. Tuch]

Seeing Subaru go from exasperation to admiration, Garfiel snorted. Just then, Ram, returning from outside, handed him a cup of steaming tea.

[Ram: This is the definition of low-grade tea]

[Garfiel: Shouldn't you usually speak a bit more politely when giving someone something?]

Ram replied with a [Is that so], and handed the cup over with a composed expression.

Garfiel received the tea, and, even though it was probably burning hot, poured it all down

his throat in one go. Although he was carnivorous, apparently he didn't have a sensitive tongue. Seeing him empty the whole cup in one gulp, Ram let out a deep sigh.

[Ram: As usual, you are a man who has no regard for tea. That doesn't suit Ram]

[Garfiel: But it just tastes like leaves. If yer want to whet yer throat, water's the same. Right?]

[Subaru: While I agree that tea tastes exactly like leaves, I can't help but have some reservations against such an extreme argument. Ram, how about letting him drink the other cup of tea?]

As Subaru pointed it out, Ram handed the other cup of tea to Garfiel. Its wavy color faintly resembled something along the lines of "Autumn Leaves", and even having noticed this from a distance, Subaru couldn't stop himself from... well, recommending it.

Its wavy color faintly resembled something along the lines of "Autumn Leaves", and even having noticed this from a distance, Subaru couldn't stop himself from... well, recommending it.

[Garfiel: Hey, you're pretty sensible after all, aren't ya. You get that just one cup isn't enough..... Pfft! Haah!? Ooy, you... isn't this one just leaf water.....?]

[Ram: If it wets your throat, whether it's water, tea or leaf water it's all the same, correct? Since you've already put it on your lips, go ahead and drink the whole thing. If you leave anything... I will twist it off]

Without saying what exactly she would be twisting off, she shot a sharp glare at Garfiel's crotch. Just from that, Subaru realized that her target was the vitals, and unconsciously closed up his legs at the sense of danger. Garfiel reluctantly emptied the cup of its contents, wringing at the bitterness. And on the side, Roswaal, who had so far only been observing their conversation, suddenly spouted,

[Roswaal: Aaa~~ha. Are a~ll of you even worried about my condition and have any intention of allowing me to rest? Or is it your actual plan to make me laugh and o~pen up my wounds? If that's the case, you're certainly succee~ding]

Saying so, Roswaal lightly touched the bandage wrapped around the upper part of his head while grinning bitterly. In fact, one could see a faint red color beginning to spread

across the white of the fabric. Just then, the mood of the room, which had been relaxed up until now, turned, and Ram, whose face had changed colour, approached Roswaal. She then covered his hand, which was pressing down on the wound, with her own, and

[Ram: I'm very sorry, Roswaal-sama. Even though Ram was by your side.....]

[Subaru: Wasn't it your tea-jokes that made sure he would laugh?]

His disruption was silenced by a rock-shattering glare from Ram, and Subaru zipped it, and took a quick look at Roswaal's condition. At least, the bleeding didn't seem to be connected to anything serious. The wounds must have only stopped bleeding recently——in other words, now was probably the most important time for his recovery.

[Emilia: Roswaal, I think it'd be best if I treat you after all...]

[Roswaal: No~~, that would not be necessary, Emilia-sama]

Reaching the same conclusion as Subaru, spirits emerged in the air surrounding Emilia as she stepped toward Roswaal. But, she was stopped by Roswaal himself shaking his head. The spirits, which were shining with a blue-white phosphorescence, wavered, as if affected by their mistress' uncertainty.

Watching the side of Emilia's fair cheeks, Subaru noticed.

——As the emerging spirits floated around Emilia, for reasons Subaru could not understand, Garfiel stared at her with eyes of frozen emotion.

[Roswaal: After all, right now, there's something much more important than my trifling i~njuries. It's not like my li~fe is in any danger, so please prioritize the other matter first]

[Emilia: Even if you say that, there's no way I can do that. When there is a person who's injured, to set that aside for something else would be...]

[Roswaal: Even if I tell you this is necessary in order for you to sit upon the throne?]

Emilia's usual rhythm shattered, and the scene of her about to heal him by force if necessary, froze up. Listening to Roswaal's statement, Emilia's cheeks grew stiff, and her violet eyes opened wide. The yellow left eye watching this in front sharpened as if peering into her, gleamed enigmatically,

[Roswaal: To the house of Mathers, this "Sanctuary" is just a piece of land which had been passed down through the generations, but to Emilia-sama's future, it is of profound... yes,

of profound significance. Therefore no matter what, I certainly intended to eventually invite you here. ——It's just, you showed up a little earlier than I had planned... no?]

[Emilia: Necessary for me.....? Hey, what is that supposed to mean.....]

[Roswaal: The problem with this "Sanctuary", and Emilia-sama's problem are intimately tied. So perhaps, in this place, you would find it. Emilia-sama's support, that is]

[——!?!]

Frozen in place, Subaru watched as Emilia's expression changed. Having prompted this change, Roswaal observed her expression, and seemed to take it in as if all was according to plan. On the other hand, Subaru, still unable to pick up the exchange of emotions between the two, was left with an itch in his teeth.

However, before that agitation could be turned into words, Roswaal pointed to the silent Garfiel.

[Roswaal: Your designation, Garfiel. Guide these two to the "Sanctuary." ——Rather, the tomb]

[Garfiel: ——Heh, that a good idea?]

Swinging his emptied porcelain cup from side to side on his finger, Garfiel let out a low laugh. In response to being questioned, Roswaal drew in his chin and gently caressed Ram's peach-colored hair as she changed the bandages around his wounds.

[Roswaal: First and foremost it is crucial to understand the situation, after all. Explaining the circumstances and the other matters can come after the Sun has set, but that is not the case for the tomb]

[Garfiel: Ah, that's so, the Sun's going down soon. Won't be so simple once that happens. Alright, I'll take up guiding for ya]

Standing up, Garfiel placed his cup onto the chair he'd been sitting on, and turned to face Subaru and Emilia. Looking at the two whom the talk revolved around, but had been left out entirely, he slanted his head and opened his mouth to bare his fangs,

[Garfiel: Don't look so dumb. If you don't wanna become "like the rampaging Hoikoro from yesterday" or something stupid like that, we better get going]

[Subaru: Wait, wait, wait! We're not following the conversation at all. I wasn't even done talking to Roswaal in the first place, you know. At least let me finish that before.....]

[Ram: His wounds have opened. Changing his bandages and letting him rest is the priority now. Barusu should do as Roswaal-sama instructed, and head to the tomb up ahead]

Subaru tried to put up a fight against Garfiel's forcefulness, but that was intercepted by Ram's commanding voice. She faced him with her usual cold gaze, and placed a hand on the bed,

[Ram: Calm down, let us talk once night comes. Roswaal-sama isn't going to run away or anything like that. But if you don't visit the grave before sun-down, that *is* going to run away.]

[Subaru: I've never heard of such an energetic grave in my life!]

While scratching his head in resignation, Subaru felt Emilia's gaze piercing into the side of his face. Her eyes were flickering with feeble emotions, and she seemed to be leaving it up to Subaru to decide what they should do.

To stay here and finish their conversation with Roswaal, or to be swept along by his will and be led to the gravesite by Garfiel. —The answer has been decided.

[Subaru: I understand. We'll go to that grave place. It's necessary, isn't it? We'll certainly have you properly answer our questions once we get back]

[Roswaal: So~rry, that the situation has become like this. O~nce night falls, we can discuss all sorts of things, mu~~ch more thoroughly]

Hearing Subaru's opinion, Emilia relaxed her shoulders, and Roswaal nodded with satisfaction. Garfiel and Ram also seemed to accept it, and the two of them began to move onto their respective tasks. However, before that, Subaru said [Just one thing], raising a single finger.

[Subaru: Before heading to the grave, there's something I want to ask you.]

[Roswaal: Mmm~~? I don't really mind? If it's something I can answer simply, you can go ahead and ask me a~nything]

[Subaru: Well then, I'll take you on your word. ——“Rem”, have you heard that name before?]

Pretending to change the topic, Subaru pronounced the vital question. On hearing Subaru's question, the first to react was Ram. But, it was not an answer he had hoped for. When the name entered her ears, Ram angled her head as if she had heard an entirely unfamiliar term. As Subaru's hopes dropped, Roswaal quietly mumbled the name over again in his mouth.

[Subaru:Well?]

[Roswaal: Omu. Sorry, but it doesn't sound too fami~liar. I get the feeling it sounds similar to Ram's name but, ma~ybe if it was mispronounced] ****fami~liar*. >_<

[Subaru: Is.....that so. No, that's all. If you don't remember, there's nothing. Nothing you can do]

Turning his head to the side, Subaru accepted that answer.

Ram and Roswaal's reply had shattered the faint expectation in Subaru's heart. To Rem, they had been the two people whom she had spent the longest time with, for whom she would have given her life, and whom she had admired and loved. And they had forgotten her.

Taking in the reality of this fact, the air within Subaru's heart settled. And he soberly acknowledged it.

——That in this world, the only one who could remember her, was himself.

[Emilia: Subaru, are you alright?]

With a worried voice, Emilia softly touched the end of Subaru's sleeve. Savoring the gentleness of the tip of her finger, Subaru, not wanting to let her see the darkness on his face, closed his eyes, then forcibly lifted his head.

[Subaru: I'm alright. It's not like I had any special expectations. I more or less knew it would be like this. ——What I must do, one way or another, I already have that resolve]

[Emilia: En. Let's find a way. I will help too]

Emilia nodded at Subaru's determination, and pledged her unreserved support. As the heart that had been shattered recovered in her gentle regard, Subaru shrugged up his shoulders.

[Subaru: When Rem wakes up... my love won't be wholeheartedly directed at Emilia-tan anymore... won't you get jealous?]

[Emilia: Subaru's feelings for me, if it diminishes, then maybe... But it won't be like that, right? My share and Rem-san's share, you've already said you have them all properly planned out and everything...]

In response to Subaru's flirty banter, Emilia made an unexpected retaliation. Scared witless by that retort, Subaru couldn't utter another word out of his mouth, and her face only slightly blushed, and said with a soft smile,

[Emilia: Let's go, Subaru. I want to let Ram meet Rem-san soon too]

[Subaru: A, aah, yeah. En, that's right]

Even if Ram could not remember, it would be a reunion with her twin sister. Would that reunion call back memories, or send some shock-waves to the lost love they once had for each other.

Even such a fragile hope, he will cling onto it so long as there was still meaning.

[Ram: Barusu]

As Emilia followed Garfiel out of the room and Subaru turned to follow as well, he was stopped by a call from behind.

Looking over, it was Ram who quickly approached him. While taking into her hands the replacement bandages for Roswaal's wounds, she came close to Subaru's side.

[Subaru: What is it? If you're planning on some Bandage-Play, after we leave you can have Roswaal all to yourself.....]

[Ram: Only Emilia-sama is to enter the Tomb. Barusu must never enter]

Ignoring his joke, Ram's incisive tone crushed Subaru's attitude aside.

Ram's voice was lowered, and had told him in a volume that even Roswaal could not hear. Seeing Subaru's furrowed brows, just in case, she said it once more.

[Ram: ——If you do not wish to be ensnared by the deranged will of a Witch, do not, under any circumstances, enter the Tomb]

She repeated it once again.

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——The air inside the Tomb was frigid and clear, and, quite literally, a cool otherworldliness accompanied the atmosphere that greeted Subaru.

A step, every step he took rang out an echo from the soles of his shoes, and, regardless of whether he had wanted to or not, asserted his presence in this place. But even so, the sound of these footsteps gave him an unexpected sense of calmness.

——Because in the darkness which did not even allow him to see a few meters ahead, in the miasma in which his very own existence was in called into doubt, even this sound had become a consolation to him.

Unaware of where he was, the walls which had been his only source of reference had long disappeared. Walking on and on, had he almost reached the end of his path? Subaru felt the illusion that he had stopped still.

But the sound of his footsteps refuted this. Within the certainty of the resonance of these footfalls was Subaru's very existence: the reality of his steps were guaranteed, and relying on just that small consolation, he continued onward.

How much time had passed, it was impossible to tell in the darkness. Even his thoughts became vague, and his throat, which had already given up on calling out, froze. Walking on like this, exhaustion did not come to him, but because of this, the sensation of his limbs began to blur as well.

Regardless, he walked on. He must walk on. He must not give up.

He forbid himself to stop. Walk, continue walking. Even crushed under the weight of his baggage, he must clench his teeth and walk on.

Otherwise, how would he ever face her——.

[???: ——I see, so that is your core. Very interesting indeed]

A sudden voice rang out, and just as abruptly ended, to be lost forever into the falling of the curtains.

The unimaginable darkness which stretched on no matter which way he turned, in an instant, became bright as day, and the narrow stone corridor transformed – to be wider than the ends of the world. The earth piled beneath his soles snuffed out the sound of his steps, and an air of filth which, above anything, brought nausea to his chest, sprawled throughout.

Completely different from the world up to now, was an ancient ruin befitting of reality—— a scene which he felt he might have seen before he entered the Tomb, panned out, and Subaru lost his words.

In front of him, someone suddenly approached. That is——

[???: Apologies for such a ludicrous welcome. I didn't intend it to be like this, but no matter what, this body is a thing of Greed, after all. The desire to know is... impossible to escape] Pure white, like a field of the first virgin snow, was the white impression of that girl.

The long hair draping over her back shone like the reflection of snow in a daydream of pristine white, and the few patches of skin that were showing were just as translucent, and beautiful. A radiance of wisdom lighted up her eyes; she wore on her body a simple ink-black dress, and the display of the two colors adorned the polar extremes of her beauty. Anyone who had eyes would probably be captivated by such beauty—— but instead, what gripped Subaru's entire body was an overwhelming horror that he had never felt before. Even the sense of pressure he had felt on his first encounter with the White Whale, could not compare to this.

Before the speechless Subaru, the girl shook her white hair, and narrowed her eyes, and then, as if understanding him, nodded lightly.

[???: Excuse my rudeness. I haven't even introduced myself. It was so very rude of me, please accept my apologies. It's because I haven't interacted with anyone for a very long time, I haven't recovered my voice, it seems]

Unlike the tone of her voice, the girl's expression barely changed as she softly shook her head.

Then, looking at Subaru, who had been frightened into silence, the girl held a hand over her chest in a sign for him to calm down.

[Echidona: My name is Echidona. The one called the Witch of Greed, do you understand?]



Chapter 10 [The Incarnation Of The Thirst For Knowledge]

——Since they left the house where Roswaal was recovering, about 15 minutes had passed.

[Garfiel: We're here. It's called the graveyard but it's jus' a lame ol' grave]

Saying this, Garfiel jerked up his chin to point at an old ruin on the verge of the Sanctuary. Constructed from an assembly of stones, the architectural style was primitive, and quite far from the impression of anything magical.

It is unknown just how many years had passed since it had been built, but from the cracks that littered the face of its walls, and the remarkable density of the sprawling ivy, it must have been something from over a century ago.

The entrance of the ruin was in line with the forest, and most of the building was engulfed into the trees, making it impossible to guess the true size of the structure at a glance. If this was the burial place of the "Witch of Greed", then perhaps it could be thought of similarly to a great pyramid of the original world.

[Subaru: A powerful person wanting to sleep in a large tomb; this is the same for all Ages, and in all Worlds, huh.....]

Touching his chin and ruminating on these thoughts, Subaru tilted his head to the grand scale of the building.

Being someone who lives in the moment, Subaru wasn't all that interested in what people would think of him after his death. But then again, the fact that he wasn't an important enough person to leave any real trace in history, probably contributed to the development of this view.

Anyways,

[Emilia: It's good that we got to the grave, but what are we supposed to do here?]

Standing next to Subaru, Emilia looked up at the ruins, and asked Garfiel this question with a puzzled face. Subaru had the same question as well, and directed his gaze onto the back of the blonde youth guiding them here. In response to this, Garfiel clacked his canine teeth as he looked back,

[Garfiel: You can hear the details from that bastard Roswaal after you get back. So for now, what I want Emilia-sama to do is just to get inside]

[Emilia: All I have to do is go inside? Don't I have to do something once I'm inside?]

[Garfiel: Now the Sun's still up. Even if ya get deep inside the Tomb, the "Trials" won't start. Ya got no preparations or anything, and first you gotta check out whether you have the qualifications] (*"Trials" 試練 is the same word used by Petelgeuse in Arc 3. Some anime subtitles may have translated it as "Ordeals"*)

[Subaru: Wa wa wait, wait a second! You're jumping all over the place. Trials or preparations or qualification, there's no explanations at all!]

Cutting in front of Garfiel, who might decide to forcefully push Emilia inside, Subaru called out to his responsibility to explain. But Garfiel only showed the irritated face he had already shown so many times in this last hour, and wrinkling up his nose,

[Garfiel: Yeah who cares, what's the problem? Go in, and afterwards when you get back to Roswaal you'd understand everything. If ya make me explain all that stuff, I'll make mess of it and ya' won't understand a thing]

[Subaru: It's like you're forcing us to sign a contract without reading its contents here, there's no way in hell we're going to do something like that. If you're bad at organizing words, then just answer my questions one by one properly]

[Garfiel: Uugh..... yeah, whatever. I'm stuck with ya til sunset, so make it short]

Slightly spreading out his arms, it seems Garfiel swallowed his proposal. Relieved that they were finally able to get some discussion going, Subaru wondered what he should ask first —So then,

[Subaru: This is the "Graveyard"..... meaning the grave of the "Witch of Greed", is that right?]

[Garfiel: That's what I heard. Actually, I got no idea whose bones're buried here. This place is the grave of the Witch of Greed, 'least that's what the guys at the village told me] The rather half-assed reply gave Subaru the feeling that something was out of place, but he gulped down this sense of incongruity for now. Then, picking up on some words from his earlier remarks....

Two terms that seemed to be of particular importance were "Trials" and "Qualification".

[Subaru: The "Trials" that will start inside the Tomb, what is that? I have to admit... from my experience over these past few weeks, I don't have a positive impression of that word at all]

[Garfiel: Calm down, being tested and all that, I don't like it either. So, ah, the about the "Trials".....I don't know any details]

[Subaru: Oy]

[Garfiel: Don't get angry, I'm not playin' aroun' here. Just, I know it happens inside the Tomb. And those who can't clear those "Trials", won't be released from the impasse of the trial grounds]

[Subaru: Release.....who?]

[Garfiel: The ones who possesses "Qualification". Guys who're qualified can't get out of the trial grounds. Long as the "Trials" aren't completed, the Witch's desire to possess will not let go]

It was a flimsy answer, but Garfiel didn't seem to be distorting the topic on purpose. Having digested the contents as best he could, he had said exactly what he understood. But still, if his statements didn't answer anything on-point, it's probably because his own understanding was vague in the first place.

However, connecting up the fragmented answers from just now, Subaru managed to form some kind of an understanding of the current situation in his mind. So, the answer he got from combining the scattered pieces was,

[Subaru: Only those who are qualified may enter the tomb, and if a person with qualification cannot clear the Trials, they cannot get out of the Sanctuary..... is it like that?]

[Garfiel: Ah.....? Somethin' like that..... I guess?]

[Subaru: I thought I digested a lot but still it's still pretty useless.....]

Twisting his neck, Garfiel, who probably still didn't understand, gave back this unreliable reply. Reserving his attitude for now, Subaru turned to Emilia beside him. Taking in Subaru's gaze, Emilia voiced her conclusion on the matter, which was

[Emilia: Earlier, when I entered the Sanctuary, my consciousness suddenly died out..... was that, what this is?]

[Subaru: That was the barrier, and when she passed across the range she fainted? Well, Otto and I were all good and healthy.....]

[Garfiel: That's probably cuz you got no qualification]

Just as Subaru understood the answer to the reason behind Emilia's sudden collapse, Garfiel interrupted, pointing one finger at Subaru, and at Emilia with another,

[Garfiel: Emilia-sama, bein' a Half-Elf, has the qualification. But, Subaru, bein' a straight' up pure-blooded human, doesn't have the qualification. So y'can go in and out freely. But, y'can't take the Trials]

[Subaru: Wait wait hold on. So then, considering those lines, is it something like this?]

Holding his breath, Subaru organized his thoughts. Then, recalling their conversation on his first meeting with Garfiel, and as he guided them to the Sanctuary, Subaru noticed it.

[Subaru: The ones who can take the Trials are Half-Elves..... or, half-bloods between humans and demi-humans. So that means the people living in the Sanctuary are all like that?]

[Garfiel —Aah, I didn't mention this yet did I]

Listening to Subaru's answer, Garfiel nodded looking satisfied, and blinked.

In the next moment, opening his eyes, his pupils had turned gold, and thin like those of a carnivorous beast. The tips of his canine teeth grew, and the nails of his raised claws sharpened like blades.

An illusion of his small body getting larger — rather, it was no illusion. His short blonde hair had grown so much that it covered his back, and the same golden hair grew on his exposed arms and legs, covering up everything.

[Garfiel: I also got a whole lot o' those blood left in me. "Atavism" 's my specialty]

[Subaru:Wooooow. Can I snuggle in it?]

Racking his brains searching for a way to hold back his excitement, Subaru stuffed his hands into his armpits to conceal the shaking of his fingers. But that request had to be canceled seeing Garfiel had already returned to his original shape. Having witnessed Garfiel's shapeshift with her own eyes, Emilia gasped in her breath, and took a step forward,

[Emilia: So, after all, this village is a gathering of demi-human species.....]

[Garfiel: More accurately speakin', it's a collection of mix-bloods between human and demi-humans. For th'love of it, all sorts of races o' people like that're gathered here. I'd say that Roswaal bastard has a "Demi-Human Fetish" or something]

[Emilia: So that's why Roswaal said something like that. That for me, this place is.....]

Saying so, Emilia placed her hand on her lips and sank deep into thought.

For Subaru on the other side, this information wasn't very light to take in either. In any case, this meant that the people of this place, even though the details may vary, all had this one thing in common with Emilia. Emilia's past, of being shunned, and rejected, perhaps they could understand that pain,

To her, perhaps that may just be licking old wounds. But, if there were others who could support her in this way, what would she feel about that?

He knew her scars, and wanted to caress them, but Subaru, never having experienced the same pain, could not possibly know how to heal them without opening them up instead. All this, had haunted his mind.

[Subaru: That's an unexpected flow of things, but I understand the circumstances of the village and the qualification now. So then..... the problem is with the Trials. You said you don't know the contents, but at least know that is going to happen after sunset, right?]

[Garfiel: Yeah, that's the thing. I don't know the specifics either. Only that you're here to check if ya qualify, at least. If you came here at night, the Trials would start, and that'd be the real deal]

Pointing to the ruins with his thumb, and nudging to Emilia with his chin, Garfiel revealed their current purpose. Nodding to what he had just heard, Subaru gazed up with his mouth open, at the Tomb which was waiting.

Tangled in dense, festering ivy, the thin darkness of the sickly air beckoned, waiting for them. The term “Trials” only served to deepen this solemn impression, elevating it in his thoughts to something more than an expedition into an old ruin.

And, more than anything, that he might possibly be sending Emilia into a place of danger — this fact, was unbearable to Natsuki Subaru.

[Subaru: Sorry, Ram. Looks like I'll be going against your warning a lot sooner than I thought]

[Garfiel: Y'said somethin'?]

[Subaru: Suddenly getting Emilia-tan to venture inside gives me so much anxiety it breaks my heart. So first, for scouting and sacrificing purposes... shouldn't Garfiel rush in first?]

Lifting up a finger, Subaru made his suggestion. Garfiel looked blank for a second, and then gave a broad smile and once again slapped his laps while making a dry sound with his throat, and,

[Garfiel: Isn't that normally the place where ya say "I'll go!" to show off?]

[Subaru: I do want to say it, and I do want to show off quite a bit, but if something happens to me, the probability of me surviving is way too small, so I think you're more suitable for that. Seeing you can crush the ground with a stomp, you can probably come back alive pretty easily. You're the strongest, after all]

[Garfiel: Uh? W, well, I *am* the strongest. Don't know 'bout the Trials or anything, but no matter what kind danger falls out, I'd be like "Penipeni never yields" and all that!]

What exactly he was holding on to was unclear, but Garfiel was in a good mood, rubbing himself under the nose, and there was no need to pour cold water on that, so Subaru didn't say anything. But then, that good mood quickly evaporated, and Garfiel went on [But then]

[Garfiel: T'bad I can't go in. 'S cause of my contract or somethin']

[Subaru:Contract?]

[Garfiel: Yeah, it's annoying as hell. Besides, shouldn't be me doin' this]

Kicking the soil with his foot, Garfiel declared this with a click of his tongue. He didn't seem to be joking around or anything, so apparently it was a fact that he could not enter. As to what would happen if he violated the agreement—that was not a question he could ask in front of Emilia, considering how important promises were to her. Anyways, now that the situation was blocked in every direction. Letting Emilia go alone was out of the question, but the Garfiel-scouting-plan was dead. Then, in that case, there was only one choice remaining.

[Subaru: I'll go look for Otto so can you wait for a bit?]

[Emilia: Within the time you do something like that, the sun would go down—It's alright. I will go in]

Just as Subaru was trying to get another sacrifice, it was gently rejected by Emilia. As if her mind was now prepared, she glared at the entrance of the Tomb, while lights of vigilance gleamed within her violet pupils, wary of what might arise inside.

She too, judging from the sound of "Trials" and "The Tomb of a Witch", must have guessed what unsettling things might be taking place within.

Carrying the same concerns and anxieties as she did, yet to lack even the strength to hold her hand, wouldn't that be far too pathetic.

[Subaru: Ok just a bit inside..... no, just near the entrance, but I'll just go in a little bit and check, how's that.....?]

[Garfiel: I think it's better if ya don't? Subaru ain't got the qualifications. If ya go in without bein invited by the Witch's Tomb, you'll end up just like Roswaal]

[Subaru: Like Roswaal..... You mean that guy's injuries, are because he went in there?]

As the image of Roswaal's bandage-covered body resurfaced in his mind, Subaru tried to press back his astonishment as he looked up at Garfiel, who crossed his arms and nodded in confirmation,

[Garfiel: Well it won't be like that for any unqualified dumbass that wanders in there at night. It's only cus it was that guy, tha you got somethn like that. I wouldn't be surprised if a normal guy without qualifications went in there and got ripped in half]

[Subaru: Those injuries weren't inflicted by anyone, so that's what he meant.....]

Roswaal's roundabout statement finally made sense. When he said earlier that he wasn't wounded by anyone in particular, he had been referring to something like that.

But then, another question arose. Why did Roswaal enter the Tomb?

——That he himself was unqualified, he must have known that.

[Subaru:I better go check inside first after all]

Leaving the doubts about Roswaal for later, Subaru lowered his head as he made this conclusion.

Hearing his answer, for an instant Emilia and Garfiel looked stunned, before,

[Garfiel: Oy oy, were you listenin to me? It'd be dangerous if a dumbass without qualification goes in. Roswaal got like that at night time, but even if it's noon ya won't be much safer]

[Emilia: Yeah, it's dangerous, don't do it Subaru? If I go, it'd be alright. I was never thankful for it, but being a Half-Elf has its uses too, I guess, so.....]

[Subaru: I'm glad you're worried about me, but]

Casting a gentle gaze on Emilia, who was tugging on the end of his sleeve, Subaru softly picked off the fingers which were holding onto him,

[Subaru: If we calm down and divide up our roles, isn't this the natural conclusion? Going inside is dangerous, that's the same for both of us. What we know so far just means that I might be in slightly more danger. So next we should be looking at what each of us can do]

[Emilia: What we can do?]

[Subaru: If something bad happens inside, I won't be able to heal Emilia-tan. Unless Garfiel turns out to be that kind of insanely surprisingly guy, and happens to be an amazing healing magic user, then it'd be a different story]

[Garfiel: Wounds, mostly you can just rub spit on 'em and it'll be good, right?]

[Subaru: Judging from the suspect's testimony..... it's pretty much like that. Since either of us have the possibility of getting injured, I'd want to keep the healer Emilia-tan safe as an insurance]

Taking a sidelong glance at Garfiel, who had said those words proudly, Subaru tried to persuade Emilia.

Emilia seemed somewhat shaken by Subaru's argument, but, deciding that she could not give ground on the important part, continued with [But], shaking her head from side to side,

[Emilia: Major injuries..... or if it's a life-threatening wound, I won't be able to treat it. Puck isn't responding either, so there's a limit to what I can do. Roswaal has settled down now, but.....]

[Subaru: Well, those wounds were pretty dangerous ones, huh.But still, try to believe in the slipperiness of my survival skills. I think I rank pretty high on the resilience index of this world, you know?]

He smiled at Emilia, who was not letting go; only, this time, his reply did not sound like he was joking.

In fact, it's rare to find someone as bad at giving up as Subaru. If he were given an infinite number of chances to keep trying, no matter how many times it takes, he would probably keep trying.

No matter how many times his heart is broken, and crushed, he will keep struggling in search of the answer he was seeking.

Because that, is Natsuki Subaru's —.

[Subaru: Then what if I make you a promise? Then you won't have to worry anymore. I promise, I will return to Emilia-tan's side, and I will never leave you]

[Emilia: —ok]

Holding out his pinky finger, saying it almost teasingly, he received an unexpectedly favorable reply. Like the stunned Subaru, Emilia held out her pinky as well, and slightly tilted her head,

[Emilia: Um, what do you do with this finger?]

[Subaru: Eh? Uh, we tangle up each other's pinky fingers like..... Uuuooooouu, Emilia-tan's fingers are super thin and white and cute.....!]

Their fingers tangling up, Subaru was moved by the unexpected contact. Then, following the violet pupils waiting for the next prompt, he quietly cleared his throat, and

[Subaru: Pin-ky-pro-mise. Liar-turns-into-a-pin-cushion]

[Emilia: Pinky promise!]

Their pinky fingers separating at the same time, in this way, the promise between Subaru and Emilia was sealed.

This time, it was a promise made upon an understanding of how heavy promises were to Emilia. It was no longer possible to treat them like he did before, when he had taken them so carelessly.

[Subaru: So, I'll just take a quick look inside. Basically, I'll keep calling out while I'm looking around, so make sure to keep calling back to me from the outside so I don't get too lonely]

[Garfiel: Son of'a... sometimes I can't tell if yer a badass or a wimp]

[Subaru: I'm a rather careful person. But in the end, I'm breaking Ram's advice after all.....]

Muttering the second half of that sentence in his mouth, Subaru apologised to the girl with peach-colored hair in his heart.

The deranged will of a Witch — what she had said was a disturbing term, and one he did not want Emilia to hear. Because surely, she would insist on going in by herself, with an even firmer attitude.

[Emilia: Subaru. If you feel there's something dangerous, you have to come back right away]

Emilia held her hands in front of her chest, and saw Subaru off with a worried gaze.

And in return, Subaru shot her an original thumbs-up with his pinky finger raised, sparkled his teeth in a smile, and took his step forward — turning toward the Tomb.

Crossing over the ivy under his legs, he concentrated his sight on the absolute darkness that lay several meters beyond the entrance. The Grave was filled with silence, and for now, there seemed to be no sign of begrudging voices, or atrocious creatures lying in ambush.

Still, on the other side of that darkness, what could be awaiting him, was truly, in every sense, unknown.

[Subaru: Ee~h, screw it. “If you don’t venture into the tiger’s den, you won’t get the tiger’s cub”, right? Not that I need a baby tiger or anything!]

As a mofumofu fur-enthusiast, he did have the desire to pet a baby tiger one day, but it was not something he would take any risks over.

Anyways, Subaru, apparently influenced by Garfiel, cheered himself up with an idiom, and making up his mind, he stepped inside the Tomb.

And, the moment he stepped onto the cold surface inside——,

[Subaru: ——eh?]

There was a mysterious feeling under his foot.

Astounded, Subaru looked down and lost his words. ——The floor, had disappeared.

[Subaru: Wa, wait..... That’s just way too.....]

——early for the FLAG to be recalled.

The footing he had expected to step on did not exist, and there was not a single thing to support his body as he tilted forward. The hand which he quickly extended out could touch neither the wall nor the floor, and so, Subaru’s body was sucked into the darkness beneath his eyes ——.

[Subaru: aaaaaaaaaAAAAAH——!?!]

Deeper and deeper, he fell through the endless abyss.

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—— Then, it was around 10 minutes after waking up at the bottom of the abyss.

Walking around in the middle of a seemingly neverending darkness, at the end of his path, Subaru found himself in front of a lonely girl.

Now, in answer to her questions, Subaru told her everything that lead up to here.

[Subaru: So that’s how, falling down after all sorts of things happened, and then walking around feeling hopeless and a little hungry, I stumbled into you.Satisfied?]

[Echidona: En, satisfied indeed. It seems you are a person who’s even surpassed my expectations]

Covering her mouth with the back of her hand, the girl let out a quiet laugh that sounded like “ku ku ku” as she noticed Subaru watching her with a guarded look.

Sizzling energy was building up in his legs as if he was readying himself to dash out at any moment, and he opened and closed his hands as if preparing to seize her.

But naturally, Subaru’s clumsy assault plan was...

[Echidona: There’s no reason to be so cautious. And besides, surely you yourself can tell how little of a chance you have if you go up against me? Bravery and a fool’s courage are easily mistaken for one another, and yet are quite different things]

[Subaru: Sorry, admitting defeat doesn’t really suit my personality. And when you say there’s no need to be so cautious..... considering I’m standing in front of a person who calls herself the Witch of Greed, is it even possible to follow that advice?]

[Echidona: I see. You really are as you say. It was my bad]

As she received Subaru’s agitated reply full of rebellion, the girl — the one named Echidona, did not alter her attitude. Rather, with tremendous ease, or perhaps finding the powerless Subaru’s dogged attitude amusing, her own attitude was one which transcended even the shifting of dimensions.

Almost like reading a Manga, it was as if she was looking down on a sketched out character with eyes of a completely different dimension. To her, Subaru had never even been standing on the same stage as herself in the first place.

It was precisely because of this, that Subaru regarded her with the greatest caution.

A person emitting an oppressive aura that surpassed even that of the White Whale. The one going by the name of the “Witch of Greed”. To what extent was all this real, was an irrelevant question. What was relevant, was that she was a person who was not to be taken lightly, whose overwhelming existence could be recognized even by the likes of Subaru.

However, as cold sweat emerged all over Subaru’s forehead, she sent him a playful glance,

[Echidona: Alas, to be treated so cruelly really hurts my feelings. As you can see, I am only a meek and gentle girl, you know? If a boy looks at me with those eyes, it's not like I wouldn't get any ideas]

[Subaru: You aren't talking about the girl who's got "DEATH FLAG" written in big red letters on it, are you? Just so you know, ever since I got here, my caution sensor's been acting up like crazy]

After having tasted "death" so many times since coming to this world, Subaru had acquired some sort of an ability. Even though his deaths are still piling up in spite of this ability, his constant desire to avoid that experience again is forcing Subaru to incorporate more and more vigilance into his consciousness.

And according to that, the level of danger this girl posed was no less than when he was standing in front of Petelgeuse.

Although,

[Echidona: It seems we won't be able to talk properly this way. It can't be helped. ——In that case, how about this arrangement?]

Saying this, Echidona softly raised her right hand in front of her face. Subaru gulped down a breath at this gesture, and immediately after, the girl snapped her fingers with her raised hand.

A faint sound rang out —— and the world transformed before Subaru's eyes.

The cold stone space of the bottom of a crypt vanished, and panning out in its place was a prairie of green grass swept by the wind. ——And, on top of a small hill,

[Subaru: Wha——!?!]

[Echidona: Instead of playing in a place like that, how about here?]

Laughing at Subaru's amazement as he looked all around, on top of the hill,

Echidona —— sitting in one of the chairs surrounding a white table, showed Subaru a seat opposite her own, and pleaded for him to come.

With no idea what just happened, Subaru hesitated as he came up to her. Neatly placed on the table were steaming cups of tea.

Seeing Subaru staring at her silently,

[Echidona: Don't worry, there's nothing dangerous inside. I could take a first sip if you like? Although, if you suspect whether a Witch can't be poisoned, then it wouldn't prove a thing]

[Subaru:I'm beat. Since coming in here, all my common sense just keeps getting overturned. What happened just now? You could use Spatial-Transition magic as well?]
Before this, Subaru's experience of Spatial-Transition magic had been at the hands of Beatrice.

With her hands, she had thrown Subaru out of the Forbidden Library and launched him all the way into a livestock barn in Arlam village. ****This happened right after Beatrice threw him out in the Arc 4 Chapter 3 Prelude: Arc 3 Ch71 [The Girl In The Forbidden Library] excerpt – TC*

According to Julius, this magic was a lost art, but if the person in front of his eyes was a Witch, then it would not be such a surprising thing.

[Echidona: Spatial-transition..... oh, the Dark magic. No, this is your misunderstanding. That magic has a lot of disadvantages. I'm not fond of it so it's not something I'd use. This now was just a small trick. I have some degree of freedom here. Because this is my Citadel, after all]

[Subaru: Your, Citadel.....?]

Furrowing his brows at Echidona's words, Subaru looked all around once again.

The wind-swept grasslands seemed to be endless, and in all directions there appeared to be nothing beyond the horizons. In reality, whether this empty landscape actually existed was another matter, but it was truly a fantastical sight.

Noticing this, Subaru gulped down his saliva and then shrugged his shoulders with a smile on his face,

[Subaru: Unfortunately, I can't see a Castle or even a hut anywhere. What, is your Citadel being rebuilt right now or something? Or did they repossess everything except your table and chairs because you can't pay back the loan?]

[Echidona: Fffhaha. You really are funny. In front of me, there are very few people who could throw such impudent retorts, except other Witches like myself. Surely, after my death, I never thought there would be an increment in that number]

As if the number of times Echidona could remember herself laughing at a joke was something that could be counted on one's fingers, adding Subaru to that list seemed to bring her great joy.

But on the other hand, Subaru's face loured as he caught a phrase which could not be missed from her words. Just now, she surely said this. That it was "after my death".

[Subaru: If it is true that you are the Witch of Greed, then you should be dead if I remember correctly. I came here to visit your grave, after all]

[Echidona: Oh in that case I sincerely thank you. If you wish to bring me some flowers then please place it near the entrance. I am a person who is not fond of alcohol, so if you want to make an offering then something sweet would be appreciated]

[Subaru: So there's a culture of offering in this world too, huh..... Sorry, but I didn't bring any local produce and I forgot to buy the flowers. Please be satisfied with my smile]

It was a smile of flowers blooming in profusion—the poisonous types of flowers, though. As Subaru was showcasing that, Echidona purred pleasantly. She then brought the cup resting on the table to her lips, and, taking a sip, she went on,

[Echidona: I've never had a chance to drink tea so happily even when I was alive. Just as I thought, there are things to look forward to even after death. New discoveries are inexhaustible]

[Subaru: You know, this conversation between you and me being a thing in itself is already really weird.Damnit, I'll drink it. I'll just drink it!]

Acting so cautious and on edge in front of a person who had no guard up started making him feel stupid, so Subaru, as if plundering it, snatched the cup from the table and gulped down its contents in a rush.

It was neither water, nor tea, nor black tea, but had an inconceivable taste. It was not unpleasant, though.

[Echidona: Drinking up something a Witch gave you, you must be quite courageous]

[Subaru: Hah. Having come all the way here, how can I be frightened now. First of all, if you wanted to kill me then in the next panel I would have already been in cinders. So I shouldn't be so cautious about a cup of tea]

Swinging his hand, he placed the emptied cup down on the table with [Thanks for the treat], and continued,

[Subaru: It was neither good or bad but, what kind of tea was this?]

[Echidona: Considering it was something formed out of my Citadel. If I put it into words, it'd be my bodily fluid]

[Subaru: What the hell did you make me drink!?!]

Subaru jumped up knocking his chair away, and struggled to vomit out the liquid he just drank. But, she only softly giggled "kkuku" at Subaru's dramatic overreaction

[Echidona: That was unexpected. I didn't think my appearance was that bad]

[Subaru: However much it may be the body fluids of a beautiful girl, I don't want to drink it without being prepared first! And even if I was prepared I don't want to drink anything described as bodily fluids! I have normal fetishes, you know!?!]

He had no property of being excited by saliva or sweat, at least he thought.

Although if that was Emilia's or Rem's, he thought it might not be too bad, but he quietly hid that in his heart, and went on,

[Subaru: Crap, I can't vomit this out. —Hey, this isn't bad for my body or anything right?]

[Echidona: Don't worry. It is easily absorbed by the body without obstructions. It is bodily fluid, after all]

[Subaru: You aren't really saying something good, stop doing that face!]

Seeing Echidona's slightly bragging attitude, Subaru winced. And Echidona, to whom Subaru was voicing his vehement objection, only tilted her cup with a refreshing expression, and went on [Anyways],

[Echidona: You really are an intriguing character. The fact that you are standing in front of me normally is proof of that]

[Subaru: What, you're too much of a beautiful girl so normally other people's eyes collapse when they see you or something? I'll say this first, I feed my eyes on who I consider to be

the most beautiful girls on a regular basis. So even looking at you I don't have many opportunities to think of you as a that cute of a girl]

[Echidona: No, when normal people stand in front of me they vomit. It's funny, right?]

[Subaru: What's so funny about that!?!]

Right from the beginning of their conversation, there had been nothing but unsettling words popping out. Subaru took another look at the girl sitting in the chair, Her hair and her entire body were white like snow. Her black clothes looked almost like she was in mourning dress, and a remaining hint of youthfulness gave her beauty a color of bewitching glamour. He mused in his thoughts about how a beautiful woman in funerary clothes could have a certain magical charm, but her never-disappearing aura of oppressiveness kept making him regard her existence as a menace.

[Echidona: So——]

Then, looking up at Subaru whose vigilance had not dissipated, she placed her emptied cup on the table as well, and, tracing her finger on the edge, she went on,

[Echidona: Talking on like this would be a refreshing pleasure for me butit wouldn't be so for you, would it? I think there must be something you want to say, or want to ask, isn't there?]

[Subaru:Yeah there is. That's right! Being swallowed by the atmosphere I had completely forgotten, but that's right. You are no, actually before that, where the heck is this? Is this really inside the Tomb?]

For Subaru, this was connected to the place he fell into not long after he stepped into the Tomb.

He would have readily believed that the gloomy place from before was the bottom of the Tomb. But now, having been invited to a prairie like this, even that felt doubtful.

To that question from Subaru, Echidona softly stroked her own white hair with her hands, and,

[Echidona: That question was half correct and half incorrect. Your body is surely inside the Tomb, but your mind is in my Citadel. To put it into words, this is inside a dream]

[Subaru: A dream.....? But, I don't remember your face so much to see you in a dream]

[Echidona: You are inside a dream, I could say, but it does not have to be inside your dream. This is my Citadel——so, it is inside my dreams. A space similar to this one... don't you know it?]

To Echidona's pursuit, Subaru held his breath. He then slightly shook his head,

[Subaru: Wha, what is your basis for saying something like that.....]

[Echidona: I have no assured proof. But, somehow or another, I just felt it. Your attitude looks away from something you know; I just felt like that your's resembles the behavior of a person like that]

[Subaru:It's true, that I don't know. But, what you're saying is not wrong either]

It was not a severe way of putting it, but to Subaru, it felt like her words were an impeachment.

Echidona's words were not mistaken, but Subaru's reply was no lie either.

When he was told that he was inside a dream, Subaru, while he was surprised, also comprehended it easily. It was as if this feeling was well-known and understood by his heart already.

Why it felt like that —— he could not find the reason even searching through all his memories, though,

[Subaru: I'll accept that this is inside your dreams for now. So then, how do I get out of here?]

[Echidona: To wake from a dream, one either wishes to wake up, or is woken up externally. However, even if someone tries to wake me from the outside, my body is no longer present, and it is quite difficult to wake yourself from someone else's dream. So, you can't wake up until I feel like letting you go, and decide to wake up, I think]

[Subaru: ——! Then, are you actually.....]

Subaru shivered at Echidona's simple words.

Her Citadel, the meaning of that word now carried a shape of vivid reality. Subaru's captured soul was now in her palms. The deranged wills of a Witch which Ram had spoken of—— the truth of those words swelled in his mind.

[Subaru: Not planning on letting me leave.....?]

Even though he was exercising the greatest caution, he was throwing words which may enter him into a fatal rift with the Witch. The fact that if she revealed her true nature he would have no chance against her was well understood.

And then, to the question by Subaru, she spilled out a small sigh,

[Echidona: No, not really. I will let you go if you want to go back, you know? I was not the one who called you here, it was you who came by yourself, after all]

[Subaru: What are you doing to my nervousness? 'Mr.Serious' is not breathing, you know?]

[Echidona: Mr.Serious, unlike you, is not standing in front of me. Maybe he's vomiting under the shade of a tree somewhere?]

In front of Echidona's smoothly spewed venom, Subaru felt sapped of all his strength. In the end, what was she trying to do by coming into contact with him?

It had only been a short time, but even after their conversation he had no grasp of her character at all. Although, for a person referred to as a Witch, it was not surprising that it would not be possible to understand her so easily.

[Subaru: Anyways, then please let me go if you can let me go. There's probably a girl who's waiting and getting worried about me. If I had the time to drink your body fluids, I'd rather go back to that girl so she won't be so worried]

[Echidona: That's fine with me, but is it fine with you?]

[Subaru: Fine with what?]

[Echidona: To go back when you are right in front of me, that is. —An opportunity to have a conversation with the Witch of Greed, it's not something that people other than yourself could get even if they tried]

This being said, it was the first time that Subaru understood the meaning of her words and taken them into his focus.

Yes. It was. He had only been focused on her menace so far, but had overlooked the most important thing. If she was the Witch of Greed, if she was really the existence which had borne this name in life, then,

[Subaru: You.....know the answers to, the things I want to know?]

[Echidona: You are asking me, for the whereabouts of knowledge ——are you?]

In response to Subaru's wrenched out words, once again Echidona laughed with "ku ku ku...". Laughing, this laughter which felt like it was her happiest yet, inflicted the sense of oppression upon Subaru more strongly than ever before.

The atmosphere distorted, and the ambiance of the endless grasslands suddenly began to collapse. The sky cracked, the prairie burned up, and the world beyond the horizons started to decay.

Feeling a non-existent tremble, Subaru hastily stretched out his hands toward the surely existing table. But the moment he touched it, it scattered as if changing into sand. Then, [Echidona: Just as I thought, you are an amusing being]

Lifting her face, the scenery around Echidona deteriorated, and a bizarre pattern started to cover over the world. A shadow was expanding, extending out arms and legs that stuck and clung onto Subaru's entire body.

In revulsion, he tried to desperately escape, but the collapse of the world had already spread very close to the two of them. The scaffold for escape did not exist. And just so, the world gradually lost out,

[Echidona: If you want to exchange questions and answers, then this space is plenty enough. To know what you want to know. Your desire for such a thing——or rather your Greed, I do approve of it]

What remained between them, was just the space between the chairs in which they were seated. It was a distance close enough to touch if he only stretched out his arm, a world in which they shall sit upon their chairs and have their talk.

The world outside of this had already disappeared. The bottom of the darkness to which his footing had been lost seemed to have no end. Probably without a joke, it would not be possible to come back if he were to fall.

As a chill ran down Subaru's spine, seated on her chair, Echidona seemed to be in a good mood.

She clapped her hands, and gazed into Subaru with her shining eyes,

[Echidona: Come now, what would you like to hear about? If it is anything I know, then I would answer to anything. Is it about the “Witch of Gluttony” Daphné, who had created beasts differing from God, to save the world from hunger? Is it about the “Witch of Lust” Carmilla, who had granted emotion even to those who are not human, to fill the world with love? Is it about the “Witch of Wrath” Minerva, who punched and healed every person, out of grief for the world filled with conflicts? Is it about the “Witch of Sloth” Sekhmet, who drove the Dragon away, beyond the Great Falls, just to bring peace? Is it about the “Witch of Pride” Typhon, who kept on judging the guilty with the innocence and ruthlessness of her youth?]

They sounded unfamiliar — or rather, they were the enumeration of a history which should no longer be existing in the current world.

Instilled with the massive amount of information, Subaru could not utter a sound. In front of him, Echidona was still laughing.

[Echidona: Is it about the “Witch of Greed” Echidona, the Incarnation of the Thirst for Knowledge, who remain with her regrets in the world after death, to seek any and every wisdom in the world?]

Pointing to herself with a finger, she said as if with self-ridicule, and went on with [Or...],

[Echidona: The Witch of Envy, who destroyed all of these Witches and made them her food, and turned the rest of the world into her enemy — is it about her?]

Chapter 11 [Prideful Slothful Wrath]

In the space where even his footing was uncertain, before an emptiness where falling meant inevitable death, there was nothing to distract his attention away from there. For in this moment, the only subject occupying Subaru's consciousness was the girl in front of his eyes — the Witch with white-hair and white-skin, black clothes and black eyes.

That sense of overwhelming presence, of menace, that transcendent entity was of an entirely different level than all other living things.

All of Subaru's insignificant existence, his eyes, his heart, and his soul, were being toyed and tangled upon the tips of those unseen fingers.

In the face of truly inescapable horror, people often seal-in emotions such as these. Unable to breathe. Unable to feel his own heartbeat. Not even the breaking of a cold sweat, or even a blink, could proceed without her permission. There, was absolute isolation.

[Echidona: Oh dear, I may have overdone it with the intimidation. Even back then, whenever I take an interest in something, I'd end up running my mouth too much. A Witch's nature is a troublesome thing]

Suddenly, still seated in her chair, Echidona seemed to notice how her speech had overheated and took up some self reflection. But still, he could not recover from the traumatizing darkness emanating from the Witch in front of his eyes.

No, the sense of oppression he had intentionally ignored up to now, now that he truly recognized it, would not leave his mind again.

The friendly exchange between them had evaporated. Subaru could no longer see the girl in front of his eyes as a girl anymore. For her true nature was that of a Witch.

[Echidona: When I was alive, this sort of thing happens every once in awhile. It was just like this when the royalty of the various nations came to me, seeking to borrow my wisdom.....But I suppose you can no longer look at me without being guarded now]

“My my”, shaking her head as if trying to say, Echidona gazed into Subaru with her black pupils. Shaken by the sight of his own expressionless reflection in the black of her eyes, Subaru wavered, and just the same moment, she smiled.

[Echidona: In that case, maybe you’ll like this idea?]

[Subaru: ————eh!?]

An abrupt change came.

Smiling, she whispered something to Subaru as he furrowed his brows to show his non-understanding. Then, watching as her smile dissolved into the darkness, Subaru gasped, and the moment he blinked——

[Little Girl: Whatcha lo~okin at~?]

[Subaru:haa?]

[Little Girl: Well stop sta~ring at me~]

Swinging her legs around as she said this, the little girl sitting in front of Subaru puffed up her cheeks in a pout.

With dark-green hair coming down to her shoulders, it was a little girl with apple-red cheeks. Her hazel-colored skin in her white one-piece dress matched adorably, and her childish cuteness unreservedly scattered everywhere around her. And, particularly distinctive, there was a blue flower-shaped hair clip on her hair.

No matter how you look at it, it was a harmless, innocent little girl——now sitting in the place where Echidona had just been, staring back at Subaru.

[Subaru: Ah, eh, huh? W-wait. E-Echidona.....? Where the hell did she go?]

[Little Girl: Dona? Dona must somewhere around here but~ , who are you supposed to be~?]

[Subaru: M-me? My name's Natsuki Subaru. I wasn't invited here or anything, I'm just someone who got lost, drank some tea, and was heading back..... but then the owner of the house suddenly disappeared which left me in a pretty difficult situation.....]

[Little Girl: Ehh~. Then~, I'll call you Baru~]

It's hard to feel hostility toward something so cute, and even though it didn't quite fit the situation, Subaru gave this frank self-introduction. Hearing this, the little girl smiled happily, which made Subaru's heart all warm inside despite the circumstances.

Regardless of how messed up things had become, the moment Echidona disappeared it was as if the pressure had been released. If he calmly considers all this, perhaps the little girl before his eyes was just like him, having been kidnapped from who knows where. One way or another, maybe now he'd be able to escape with this little girl's help—even though he wasn't too sure how much strength she could lend him. He raised up his face and,

[Subaru: Ok, anyways let's think of a plan to get out of here while the big bad ghost isn't home. But considering there's not many places to step on... first, maybe just tell me your name, little missy.....]

[Little Girl: Say, Baru~, are you a bad man~?]

[Subaru: if you could tell me that then at least.....Wha?]

Reaching out his hand, intending to sparkle his teeth, Subaru furrowed his brows. The little girl in front of him swung her legs, which weren't long enough to reach floor, and she rocked back and forth in her chair while childishly muttering [Be~cau~se~] impatiently pursing up her lips,

[Little Girl: I'm asking~ are you a bad man, or not a bad man~. So are you~?]

[Subaru: By their very nature, all humans are creatures who sacrifice other things to survive. Therefore, perhaps from the moment we are born into this world, we are sinners. But, even so, we still live our lives. Knowing that even as we are sacrificing, something more valuable can be built upon that sacrifice..... Even though I think this kind of philosophical discussion isn't really something a little girl can understand, is that what you mean?]

[Little Girl: Um~, I heard it but I don't really understand~. Well~, ok~, if I just check~]

Toward Subaru, who looked confused, the little girl looked even more confused. Saying this, she held tight onto Subaru's extended hand. From the small palm completely wrapped up inside Subaru's, he felt a tactile softness that was unique to the hand of a little girl. And feeling this gave him a renewed resolve, that no matter happens, he will bring her safely out of this place.

[Subaru: Even though I've been around Petra, I'm still surprised I'm so fond of kids. I used to think they're too noisy and all but.....]

[Little girl: ——onlythroughpainandsufferingcanthegUILTYberedeemed]

[Subaru: Hah?]

Suddenly, the little girl quickly muttered something in a whisper.

Unable to understand, Subaru's raised up one of his brows, and felt a light impact. As if his arm had been lightly tugged, there was then a strangely liberating sensation, as if being released from a heavy burden.

Wondering what had happened, Subaru turned his head to look all around him.

Everything was just like it was before, and nothing changed in the world. The space that permitted Subaru and the little girl to sit facing each other was still without wind or sound or sensation of any kind.

Sitting in the chair in front of him, was still only the little girl swinging her legs.

Only, in her hand, she was holding a man's severed arm——

[Subaru: ——!?]

[Little Girl: Doesn't hurt so~, you're not a bad man~, I'm so relieved~]

Noticing the abnormal turn of events, Subaru looked at his own right arm——at the right side of his body where his arm should be, he saw the reality of the exposed cross-section of his shoulder where his arm had been twisted off.

Pain, blood, none of it was there before he noticed it. The bone and arteries wrapped in pink meat all exposed in the cross section reminded him of the edible meat lined up in a butcher's shop.

That is, aside from the unacceptable surreal reality that it was happening to his own right shoulder.

[Subaru: Oo, aaaAAAAA!!!! A-arm.....my arm aaaAAA!?]

[Little Girl: It doesn't hurt right~, don't yell so loud~. If you flail around too much we won't be able to put it back~]

[Subaru: Y-yo-youu!? Ripping someone's arm off, what, what the hell are you saying! G-give it back! Give it back!]

Holding the exposed cross-section of his right arm shrieking, Subaru jumped right at the snorting little girl with a demon-possessed look on his face. Yanking his right arm back from her hands, he hurriedly tried to stick it back on.

Not that a severed arm can be reattached by sticking it on, but such a thing didn't really occur to Subaru at this moment.

But,

[Little Girl:——nosinfulmisdeedshallescaperighteousjudgement]

The moment he heard something being uttered from the little girl's mouth, Subaru's posture collapsed. Rather, more accurately, the legs that were supposed to step onto the floor shattered like fine glass-craft from the knee downward.

Losing his right arm and both his knees, Subaru's body fell forward from the momentum. And receiving him, was the lap of the little girl still sitting in her chair. The little girl gently received the falling Subaru, and like a mother holding her beloved child, she caressed the terrified Subaru in her arms.

[Little Girl: You aren't a bad man at all~, but you still think of yourself as a sinner. You are a gentle~ and good child~. Poor~ thing~, you must~ be in pain~]

[Subaru: J-just.....w-wha what.....a-are you.....]

His right shoulder and his shattered legs did not bring him pain. Nor were they bleeding. Incomprehensible. An unacceptable existence. The existence of the little girl before him, the one a moment ago he had thought was a subject of protection, was now despairingly distant from that impression.

Hearing Subaru's question, the little girl tilted her head,

[Typhon: Typhon is the "Witch of Pride" you know~]

[Subaru: Pri.....!?!]

The impactful statement once again stopped Subaru's thoughts in their tracks.

Be it anger or horror, these concepts were completely blown away.

Just a moment ago, Subaru had been in front of the Witch of Greed Echidona. Then why was he now suddenly faced with the Witch of Pride?

Witches who should have already been annihilated, and died long ago——,

[Woman: ——Huuu. Guess it's my turn. Haaa, can't get out of it]

A languid voice came from above him, while Subaru's petrified throat was still trying its best to groan.

Subaru had only blinked his eyes. The color of the world did not change, and his arm and his legs are still missing. But even so,、

[Woman: Haaa, so heavy. Shouldn't you be a bit lighter without the arm and legs? Huuu, that's a man for you..... man or woman, wouldn't existence itself be better off as one big useless blob?]

The one Subaru's body was leaning against had changed from the little girl named Typhon to a different woman entirely.

The woman this time had strange magenta-colored hair: a beautiful girl with a lazy impression. Her skin and lips were sickly pale. Her downcast, half-closed eyes gave off a sleepy or, rather, generally unenergetic impression, and, as if even breathing was a chore, a depressing atmosphere loomed around her

And although she was wearing loose black robes, obvious stains and rips littered all across the fabric as if birds had walked all over it.

Looking down at the silent Subaru, she sighed lethargically.

[Woman: Haaa, you're pretty unlucky too. Being played around by Echidona, then Typhon and me.....Huuu, meeting three Witches one after another, haa, only that dummy Flugel or that stick-swinging Reid have done something like that before]

[Subaru: You're, a Witch.....as well? Just like the little girl just now, and Echidona.....]

[Sekhmet: Haa, I'm Sekhmet. Huuu, it's such a bother but you could call me the Witch of Sloth, or not if you don't want. Haa, not that I'm asking you to call me one way or another it's so confusing anyway. Huuuu, I get tired from talking so can I just stay quiet from now on?]

[Subaru: Oh give me a break. I'm gonna lose my mind here. If no one tells me soon, I can't even be sure of my own reality anymore. Please, just tell me what's going on right now]

Subaru used his only surviving left hand to grab hold of her robe, and raised up his head to look at Sekhmet. Sekhmet seemed to find that gaze a bit bothersome, and sighed, then turned down her eyes same as before,

[Sekhmet: Your right arm, haaa, and your knees are gone. Huuu, it was Typhon wasn't it? It's because that child doesn't understand other people's pain. Haaa, she's still that innocent and merciless child like before. Huu, the poor child. Haaaa]

[Subaru: My, arm and legs.....th-they can grow back right?]

[Sekhmet: Huuu, for me that's really..... aaa, but that's alright, haa. It's pretty bothersome for me too, huu, I'll leave it for the child after me and go back to sleep. Haaa breathing's such a bother. If I could take in a lifetime's worth of air all into the lungs at once, then I won't have to breathe again for the rest of my life, don't you think? Haaa]

[Subaru: If you do that your lungs will explode and we'll die right? But compared to that, my situation here.....]

Still in her languid demeanor, Sekhmet's off-beat proposition puffed Subaru's head full of smoke. As if trying to say "please take this seriously", Subaru tried to plead to her.

[Girl: ——Just now, did you say you wanted to die in front of me?]

He heard a murderous voice saying.

At this point, although it's no longer the first time Subaru had been surprised today, he still couldn't react with anything other than being stunned stiff.

Again, the person in front of his eyes changed. The Witch flaunting the full, dense head of hair had disappeared, and replacing her was,

[Subaru:Breasts?]

[Girl: ——Tch! W-where are you staring at, where!]

Trying to look up from the soft lap at the other person's face, Subaru's vision was blocked by large protruding breasts that were obscuring her face.

The sensation of the lap that was bearing the weight of his body, unlike Typhon's and Sekhmet's, now had a meatier feel to it, and honestly seemed to be full of the dynamism of a feminine body.

While literally experiencing this with his entire body, Subaru was suddenly lifted up by its owner's arm. ——with a single hand, Subaru's body had been easily hoisted up, even though his weight was still no less than an average adult woman's, even after losing his arm and both his legs.

[Girl: Look at the other person's eyes when you're addressing them, eyes! Really, men are always like this, unbelievable!]

Saying this as her anger was puffing out, it was a beautiful girl with swaying golden hair. Starting with a short skirt, she was wearing loosely fitting clothes over her body, and her stature while sitting down seemed on the short side. But even so, her large breast gave her a full-bodied impression, and gave the whole situation a somewhat titillating atmosphere... well, only the totally healthy kind, of course.

Then, glaring at the hoisted-up Subaru with rage-filled eyes, she brushed aside her hair in front of the frightened Subaru,

[Girl: Missing your right arm. Missing your legs from the knees down. Not bleeding or in pain..... looks like you've been punished by Typhon! That child.....she did something so inconsiderate again, it's just going too far!]

Looking at Subaru's painless wounds, her blue eyes were clouded over by intense emotions.

With impulsive words, and an indignant attitude, her every act was instilled with passion, and all the while she was behaving like this, there were tears pooling faintly in her eyes.

[Subaru: A-are you crying.....?]

[Girl: Not crying! Just angry! That's right, I'm just angry! At Typhon who caused all these wounds and just left you here! At the world that made that child do such an outrageous thing! And at all the people fighting and harming one another making this world hell, at the senselessness of it all!]

Her furious voice cried out, with such power that it messed up her hair as she pronounced this.

Then, lifting up her arm, she suddenly tossed the dangling Subaru up into the air.

[Subaru: eh?]

[Girl: So I absolutely will not permit it! Pain! Conflict! Wounds! How can I remain idle in front such things——!!]

The next moment, with a speed that broke the wind, the girl dashed out and struck her fist straight into Subaru. His face being suddenly injected with such incredible speed and power, Subaru's body was quite literally blown away like a leaf. But,

[Subaru: Pffu——!?!]

Expecting to continue being blown away for quite some time, he suddenly arrived at the end of the world.

Echidona had actually trapped Subaru within a world of limited space, so after being launched flying by the power-packed punch, he had only managed to fly for a short distance. The impact against the invisible wall rolling through his entire body, having gone splat in the middle of the air, Subaru turned his eyes back around. And there,

[Girl: ——All will be well! Don't ever think of turning back!]

Leaping, as if in pursuit, the girl rained punches onto Subaru's body while it was still in the middle of its falling animation-sequence.

The endless flurry of punches striking into every inch of his body, Subaru's flesh was sandwiched between the wall and her fists. The sounds of impacts ceaselessly

penetrating Subaru's body, its power went through him and into the walls, and began shaking the very world to its core.

Kneaded by the impacts, knocked up and down left and right, Subaru could no longer tell which was which as his mind turned blank. In the field of his vision, through the dance of the incoming fists, perhaps no longer wishing to conceal it, there was the face of the girl covered in a flood of tears. Droplets glimmering as they scattered through the air, just when Subaru wanted to complain "I'm the one who should be crying here...", his face was already turned away by a punch.

Not knowing when the incessant hell would end—— it suddenly ended unexpectedly.

[Girl: Let my fists revive the world! Let my anger cleanse the world! My Wrath, and my healing fists are my reply——!]

The next moment, the world shattered.

The wall that Subaru had been stuck onto, under the impacts of the girl's rain of fists—— after sensing an unbearable sensation through his clothes, Subaru felt the wall behind him shatter into dust.

In that instant, Subaru felt a sense of liberation.

When the rain of fists stopped, he felt something soft. Subaru noticed that he was lying on the ground, in the grassland of the previous world where they had their tea.

Sitting himself up, he looked all around in a stupor. Landing gallantly beside him, the girl brushed her blonde hair as she shot Subaru a stare.

[Girl: Right arm!]

[Subaru: Eh!? O-ok!]

Being suddenly called, Subaru raised up his arm, and that's when he noticed.

The arm that had been ripped off of his shoulders was now back and perfectly well, all the way to his fingertips.

[Girl: Legs!]

[Subaru: Oooo things are looking up. I can stand and walk! Look I can do a moonwalk now!]

Just to be sure, Subaru jumped up and started doing a moonwalk for good measure. Watching Subaru sliding across the grass, the girl held her elbow and nodded contently. And it was at that moment, when the swaying of her prominent bust burned itself into his memory.

[Subaru: Y-you saved me, thank you. But, considering the flow of things, you are.....?]

[Minerva: I am the “Witch of Wrath” Minerva! Not that I call myself that!]

[Subaru: You called yourself that just now!]

[Minerva: Don’t, that was no big deal! I will not allow anyone to be hurt in front of my eyes, nor tolerate to see a person wounded! It’s not a deed to be passed on for posterity or anything!]

[Subaru: You’ve totally just marked your own actions as some incredible accomplishment there! You’re not really hearing what other people are saying are you? It’s really hard to communicate with someone like that!]

Flailing his only recently-healed arms around to demonstrate his befuddlement, seeing this, Minerva just quickly turned her back to him.

[Minerva: In any case, now that the wounds are healed, there is nothing more for me to do here! Don’t get so much as a bug bite now! That’s a promise with a Witch!]

[Subaru: Even if I go live in a sterilized room that’s not possible is it!? And don’t make promises on behalf of other people! Promise with a Witch or something, wouldn’t breaking it mean some severe punishment!?!]

[Minerva: It’s no such thing. But if it ever comes to that.....*I will heal everyone*]

[Subaru: Don't say that like you're going to go around murdering everyone, it's really scary!]

But the fact remains, Subaru's body was completely healed.

Her crude healing methods——in this case, true to the description, he actually was healed at the end of all that. Beating someone up in order to heal them, to think that a phenomenon so inconceivable could possibly exist... It's almost like in those old tv-series.

[Minerva: ——Well]

Then, the girl who was gallantly walking away turned around.

Her white hair swinging with her motion, and her black dress spreading upward charmingly, all filled into Subaru's eyes. She was tilting her head to the side, quite happily gazing back at him.

[Echidona: To prove that I'm relatively harmless, I let you meet some of the other Witches. So what do you think? If your attitude could warm up to me a bit now, then waking them up from their sleep would all be worth it]

Summing up his painful experience up to now, was the Witch Echidona.

Seeing her in front of him, Subaru drew in a deep, long breath, before lifting up his head,

[Subaru: You, really are every bit a Witch..... No human would think like that at all]

And, just uttering these words took up the last bit of his strength.



Chapter 12 [A Souvenir From The Tea Party]

[Echidona: So the space I worked so hard to prepare was destroyed. Such recklessness... it's just like Minerva. That girl can be a little... too quick to strike]

[Subaru: A little.....? I think she got to it almost immediately there. That new-sensation-violent-large-breasted-healing-type-loli-tsundere. That's way too many character-tropes stuck together you know!]

Turning his perfectly healed right shoulder, Subaru started blowing this at Echidona in front of him.

The sense of pressure coming from the white-haired girl hadn't changed. But still, her arrangements had not been entirely without effect on him.

[Subaru: Well, I think I'm in the mood for a face-to-face conversation now. Compared to the other Witches, you do seem somewhat more rational..... except Witch of Sloth-san, she may be talking nonsense, but I think we can understand each other]

[Echidona: Well Sekhmet, how should I say this... of all the Witches, she is the oldest and the most rational. But if you make her angry, she won't leave anything half-way]

[Subaru: "Won't leave anything half-way"... you mean she's scary when she gets mad?]

[Echidona: Let's just say, even if we all teamed up, we'd be no match for her. Even if all the other five Witches fought together, I don't think we would be able to win against Sekhmet]

Once again sitting in her chair, Echidona explained this, as Subaru cast her a doubtful glance.

The image of the lazy girl with long, reddish-purple hair flashed in his mind. With that lifeless attitude, overflowing with inertia, that person was actually the strongest of all the Witches.

[Subaru: By the way, I've been meaning to ask... I get the feeling that you've been leaving the Witch of Envy out]

[Echidona: ——Let me just give you one piece of advice when you're talking to me]

Remembering the Witch whom Echidona had never once named, Subaru asked her this question, to which Echidona only smiled and raised up a single finger.

Subaru stared at her fingertip as she slightly tilted her head,

[Echidona: I think of the other Witches as my friends, and I think they are deserving of my respect. I have a personality with many flaws myself, and having them by my side for so long is an emotional support for me, a salvation. That is why I have been gathering up their souls, without leaving a single one of them behind]

[Subaru:I get the feeling that I've just heard something that can't be glossed over, but please go on]

[Echidona: The one who destroyed these Witches, was the "Witch of Envy". ——Would you yourself be able to smile at the entity that brutally murdered your closest friends?]

Her smile did not change. But its nature had turned.

A surge of fear ran up Subaru's spine, and by the time he noticed it, he was already nodding in agreement with her words. Seeing this, she said [That is so, isn't it?] as she pulled in her chin.

[Echidona: My, it seems like the mood has spoiled a little. How about some tea to get rid of the bad taste?]

[Subaru:I don't have the kind of courage to drink that Dona-Tea again. Unless you put some actual tea in there, then I have no intentions of eating or drinking anything in this place]

[Echidona: To be invited to a Witch's tea party... back in my day, it would've been a thing to be envied..... My my, I guess people do change, along with the times]

As if she had already prepared Subaru's portion, with a look of regret, Echidona filled only her own cup, and raised it to her lips.

But if what she said was true, then that tea would actually be her own body fluids. Then basically, she would be drinking bodily fluids that she herself had produced...

[Subaru: I heard something about rabbits... they eat their own poop and keep going like a perpetual-motion machine or something]

[Echidona: It is kind of humiliating to be lumped together with them..... isn't it? Unless, this can be taken as a roundabout way to tell me you wish to hear about the Great Rabbit?]

[Subaru: Great Rabbit?]

Subaru tilted his head. It was a word he had heard somewhere before.

Searching within his memories, he remembered where he had heard it. Indeed, it was while he was riding on the back of a galloping Patrasche, down on Lifaus Highway.

[Subaru: They are Mabeasts that line up shoulder to shoulder with the White Whale..... right? The Great Rabbit, and the Black Serpent?]

[Echidona: They're Daphne's bad legacy. Even she herself found them a bit too hot to handle. Setting the Black Serpent aside for now, you have heard of the White Whale and the Great Rabbit wreaking havoc all over, have you not?]

[Subaru: By the way, since we're talking about the White Whale, thanks to my efforts it's already been slain. Thanks to my efforts, that is]

Pointing a thumb at himself, Subaru inflated his nostrils with a boastful look on his face. And, hearing this, for the very first time, Echidona's black eyes opened wide with a look of surprise.

[Echidona: Ehh, is that so? That is, impressive. Just by your looks, you don't seem to have an arm for swords, or a gift for magic..... But you moved those around you quite well indeed]

[Subaru: It's a pretty depressing feeling when you knew right away that I didn't defeat it on my own.....! How do you know I didn't just launch at it and kill it?]

[Echidona: Whether it's the White Whale or the Great Rabbit, it's hard to imagine that there could be humans who can slay them single-handedly. In my time, the only one who could have done this was Reid]

Once again, Subaru raised his brows at the name he didn't know. Noticing this, Echidona let out a [Hmm] as she brought a finger to her narrow lips.

[Echidona: Were they not passed on to this Age? I had thought his achievements were quite remarkable. To put it lightly, he was the only one in the world who could cut down twelve fully-grown dragons all by himself]

[Subaru: No, well, it's just that my understanding of common knowledge, or actually anything related to what people normally know is kind of shallow. That guy sounds pretty incredible though]

[Echidona: ——Reid Astrea. "Sword Saint" was the title given to him, but, is it not around anymore?]

Listening to Echidona's words, Subaru's mind steadily put the pieces together.

Astrea——that was Reinhard and Wilhelm's family name, a name held by the current Sword Saint and Sword Demon, the name of that indomitable clan beloved by the Sword-God.

Then, its first generation must have been Reid Astrea.

[Subaru: Ok, I think I got it. It's still around, Sword Saints. I don't know what generation it is now, but the current Sword Saint's my bro. He's a monster who probably wouldn't lose to the ancestor-sama you knew]

[Echidona: That's quite a way to describe to a friend..... I might say that, but knowing how unconventional Reid is, I can't blame you. Anyway, now we're going to talk about the Great Rabbit, I suppose?]

[Subaru: Uhh, nah. It's not that I'm not interested in the Great Rabbit or the Black Serpent, but...]

As much it seemed that Echidona had wanted to continue talking and show off her knowledge, Subaru thought he should put a stop to that. There was a mountain of things that he wanted to know, but if he were to digest it all at the same time, his brain probably wouldn't be able to keep up.

Instead, it might be better to pick out what he really wanted to know, and pursue those topics thoroughly.

In that case, the first of the things he wanted to know was,

[Subaru: So uhh, you are Echidona, the deceased Witch of Greed. Is that right so far?]

[Echidona: I had confirmed that right at the start, hadn't I? There's no mistake about it. This place is inside my dreams, and if you wish to leave, you can just say the word]

[Subaru: I appreciate your consideration. So first off, I do have a question.....]

Touching a hand to his jaw, he directed his gaze toward the girl with white hair. And being bathed in Subaru's insolent gaze, she raised her hand to her almost translucent white cheeks and said [What would that be?] as she narrowed one of her eyes.

[Subaru: I think this is something I should have confirmed with you at the very beginning but..... first off, you're dead where exactly? Aren't you frolicking about, enjoying your days and being pretty chipper?]

[Echidona:Ahh, I see. It's true I hadn't explained that at all. We forgot to touch on it, haven't we? You and me both]

With a clap of her hand, Echidona nodded as if understanding. As she signaled her agreement with her gesture, Subaru only scratched his head wondering what had gotten into him.

With the impact of a Witch showing up, and then the Witches' class-reunion after that, Subaru had been too shocked to ask this obvious question until now.

[Subaru: Seeing a ghost inside a Tomb, it'd be good if it was that simple. But after being meddled with so much, I don't think I can just pass it off as all being in my head]

[Echidona: A ghost, I can't really deny that. After all, I am a spiritual body that has lost its physical body. But now, as to why I'm here like this..... well. It is as a counterforce. That would be the most accurate answer, I suppose]

[Subaru: Counterforce.....? What kind of..... no, actually, maybe "against what" would be a better question?]

[Echidona: You are sharp, aren't you?]

Nodding contently at Subaru's reaction, Echidona softly clapped her hands. Then, turning up to the air, she signed toward the artificial blue sky with a gesture of her hand.

[Echidona: The one who bound me to this place was Volcanica. The Divine Dragon Volcanica. You've probably at least heard of him?]

[Subaru:That would be the Dragon who signed the Pact with the rulers of the Kingdom of Lugnica or something, right? I heard that name in the great hall at the Royal Selection]

[Echidona: Yes, that would be the same Volcanica. By that Dragon's power, I am sealed here in this Grave. And the reason Volcanica did this was, as you correctly inferred, to serve as a counterforce against the "Witch of Envy"]

Echidona's gaze was calm and intellectual, but when the words "Witch of Envy" weaved from her lips, for an instant, a dangerous emotion flashed across her pupils.

Perhaps that, was the enormity of the chasm between her and the "Witch of Envy".

[Echidona: Even now, the "Witch of Envy" is imprisoned in the Sealing Stone, but her seal is not unbreakable. Nor is Volcanica's lifespan eternal, and there is no guarantee that the seal won't be undone if given the chance. There are also quite a few who believe, that there is no knowing whether every great change in the heavens and the earth might not be chipping away at the Sealing Stone. ——That, is why Volcanica left my existence behind]

[Subaru: As a fighting force to oppose the "Witch of Envy", if ever she is resurrected.....?]

[Echidona: But I was not the Witch that Volcanica had originally expected to leave behind, however. If anyone should have remained, it should have been Sekhmet. The problem was that Volcanica himself disputed with Sekhmet. And, it seems, after she beat him to a pulp, he grew rather wary of her]

As if casually gossiping, Echidona lightheartedly glossed over the intertwining fates between the Dragon and the Witch, but Subaru, who had been listening, did not laugh.

He didn't really think that the grudge between a Dragon and a Witch could be summed up so simply like interpersonal relationships. And besides, he wasn't entirely sure to what extent he should be believing a story about the "Witch of Sloth" beating the Dragon to a pulp in the first place.

Without knowing what to say, Subaru stayed silent. And in front of him, Echidona continued with an [Anyways]

[Echidona: Myself, the Witch, and the Divine Dragon Volcanica. With the Sword Saint and..... the Sage? For the time being, even if the “Witch of Envy” was resurrected, we should be able to oppose her. At least, that is Volcanica’s faint hope. So there you have it, the context behind why I am now in this disgrace, after my death]

[Subaru: So basically, the one who bound your spirit to this place is the Dragon?]

[Echidona: More accurately, it was at Volcanica’s instruction, that the magic of the Mathers bound me here. If you’ve managed to set foot in here, you must at least know of the Mathers? Or perhaps that family name is no longer around.....]

[Subaru: No, the Mathers are still around. Roswaal L. Mathers is the lord of these regions where this Tomb is located. And he’s also my employer, or should I say guardian, or should I say a pervert or something.....]

Amazed by the profoundness of that man’s potential involvement with the Witch, Subaru wondered just how he should describe Roswaal to her. But, putting Subaru’s uncertainty aside, Echidona’s finely shaped brows trembled. [Roswaal?], she muttered,

[Echidona: I’m sorry, did you say Roswaal just now?]

[Subaru: Oh? Ah, yeah. Roswaal. What, do you know him?]

[Echidona: It would be strange, if I knew him. After all, I am an existence from 400 years ago. If that was the same person who had existed in that same Age, then this conversation would’ve taken an odd turn indeed]

Subaru agreed with her observations, and just when the image of that clown’s face pouting up his lips was emerging in his mind, Echidona said [Now...], as she raised a finger to her lips.

[Echidona: The Roswaal you are talking about, does he happen to be a someone with long, dark-gray hair? His eyes would be..... yellow, I think, if I remember correctly]

[Subaru: —Nah, in that case it's a different guy. The Roswaal I know has blue hair, the same color as my jeans kind of. And his eye color's different. My guy's eye colors are mismatched, one's blue and other's yellow]

Relieved that the characteristics are different, Subaru sighed, and suddenly thought of something.

Roswaal had told him that the management of this land, the "Sanctuary", had been passed on for generations. So then, the Pact with Volcanica to seal Echidona here must have been passed on as well.

If this duty was inherited throughout the generations of the clan, then in that case,

[Subaru: Maybe Roswaal's name was inherited as well. Occasionally we get girls with really manly names this way, that happens a lot in Mangas at least]

[Echidona: To inherit Roswaal? If that were the case, it would sound like something of a nightmare]

As if agreeing with Subaru's theory, Echidona nodded, and shrugged her shoulders, giving off an impression of fatigue. Seeing this unusual change in her attitude, Subaru furrowed his brows. It was then, she said [No...],

[Echidona: The Roswaal I knew, was a person with a bit of an overly-obsessive personality. He was the kind of man who would devote his entire life to fulfill a single purpose, I'm afraid. And if after my death, he had remained unchanged, then.....]

[Subaru: Not being satisfied with his own life, he would devote even his descendant's time too?]

[Echidona: Exactly as you say. Oh my, just thinking of it is a scary thing]

Even as she said this, Echidona's lips rose into a smile.

In fact, it was exactly like the gaze of a parent who was watching over their naughty child, but surely, Subaru thought, he must be mistaken. Anyhow,

[Subaru: Well, now I understand the reason you're inside this Tomb, and who's behind it. For the actual specifics, I'll ask the modern-version of Roswaal after I wake up from this dream]

[Echidona: You are free to do so.So then, are there any other questions?]

[Subaru: Of course there's more. Next thing I want to ask about is, the Trials. I was told there'll be Trials taking place inside the Tomb. I'd like to know about its contents. And, if you could also tell me the right answers too please]

[Echidona: Asking for the questions and the answers straight from the examiner, how ruthless you are]

[Subaru: A little craftiness never hurt anyone. There's no reason not to use shortcuts when you can. I'm the kind of person who likes to play games while reading the walkthroughs, you know]

Because getting killed and having to do it for a second time would be a pain in the ass. But setting Subaru's random PLAYER philosophies aside, Echidona closed her eyes as if sinking deep into thought. Then, it was five seconds later when she opened them again, [Echidona: The Trials, is it?]

[Subaru: Ah, yeah. What kind of Trials is it anyway. If we don't pass it, a girl who's really important to me will be in trouble. She won't be able to leave the Sanctuary even if she feels homesick. And obviously, leaving her behind and going home by myself was not an option]

The Barriers that surround the "Sanctuary", if something like that was blocking her way out, then Subaru would have no wish to go outside either.

When she passes the Trials, they will go through that Barrier together.

And he will do whatever it takes to make sure that happens. For instance,

[Subaru: Even by cheating!]

[Echidona: I'm sorry to say this after you got so excited but, I know nothing about the Trials. I am not involved in them. Therefore, I don't know their contents]

[Subaru: The what!]

His momentum suddenly getting derailed, Subaru let out a yelp. Hearing this, Echidona said [Well there's nothing we can do, is there?] as she shook her head from side to side.

[Echidona: You do know what this place is, don't you? It is my Tomb, after all? In other words, this is a Tomb which would have been built after my death. And the Trials you spoke of, they take place inside the Tomb? Then the Trials within the Tomb must also have been created after I had died. So there is no way that my deceased self could possibly have had anything to do with them, now is there?]

[Subaru: There's no way I can understand that kind of rapid-fire logic!]

[Echidona: In any case, I am not the examiner. So I can't give you answers about the Trials. If anything, it's me who should ask you about these Trials. Its contents, the types of questions, the selection of its respondents, and of course, the answers to the questions... my curiosity is endless]

In her radiant eyes, the pupils of the "Witch of Greed" shined with the thirst for knowledge.

Sighing at the sight her straightforward desire, Subaru concluded that he would make no progress speaking with her on the topic of the Trials.

In that case,

[Subaru: Man, then I feel like there's not much else I want to ask you]

[Echidona:Eh? You're kidding, right? That's impossible. But I am the "Witch of Greed", you know? From all corners of the world people have come to me, seeking my knowledge. To be in front of me, with permission to ask anything you wish, you say you have nothing you want to ask me.....?]

[Subaru: Well, because you're already dead and you don't know much about what's happened after you died, right? What I want to know is mostly in the present-progressive-tense, so there's no point in asking someone who doesn't know.....]

[Echidona: Nonono, let's calm down. It is true that I'm unacquainted the present world, but in exchange, there is almost nothing I do not know about the past. Much has weathered down in 400 years, and no longer remain in anyone's memory, or history. Isn't this a chance to learn about them? Just like the conversation with the other Witches earlier. There are things that no longer survive on any record in the entire world]

[Subaru: But, I don't have much interest in Witches. Even if I learn about them, they're all already dead, and there are a lot things on my mind right now, so that kind of conversation is not really...]

[Echidona: Eeeeeehhh.....]

Seeing Subaru really intending to go home, unsatisfied, Echidona, screwed her face into a scowl. It's almost like their positions were completely reversed.

But still, as far as Subaru was concerned, it was the truth. The wrongdoings or noble deeds of the Witches of the past, whatever they were... he didn't really have an interest in such things.

Other than that, what kind of useful information he could get out of Echidona, he really couldn't think of any off the top of his head...

[Subaru: Wait, now that you mention it, I just thought of one]

[Echidona: Yes yes! Very good, that's it. I knew it, there are still things. Ask anything you want. As long as it's something I can answer, I will answer it. Go ahead!]

Already to the point of agitation, Echidona was biting onto Subaru's question not-half-heartedly.

Even if they're called Witches, at the root of it all, it was impossible to erase all traces of

their worldly instincts. Thinking this, Subaru remembered something about the “Sanctuary”,

[Subaru: The residents of the “Sanctuary” that contains this Tomb, they refer to this place as the Trial or Experimental Grounds. No matter how you look at it, “The Witch of Greed’s Experimental Grounds” sounds pretty important, and then there’s a barrier that doesn’t allow half-bloods to escape, what kind of experiments are you running here? I was hop.....]

[Echidona: I can’t say]

[Subaru:ing I could ask you that]

However, with a single stroke, Echidona’s expression vanished as she discarded the question.

At that unapproachable attitude, Subaru couldn’t help but fall silent. Seeing Subaru’s reaction, Echidona seemed to have noticed the sharpness of her own words, and made an awkward expression with her face,

[Echidona: I apologize for being so rude. But there are also things I cannot say. I can’t answer that question. It’s not that I cannot say, but that I don’t want to]

[Subaru:The term doesn’t give off a good impression, Experimental Grounds. But you don’t seem to be denying it]

[Echidona: I want you to stop there. I do not wish to be held in contempt]

Lowering her eyes, Echidona rejected any further pursuit of the topic.

The Witch with an overwhelming existence, shriveled her shoulders as she asked this of Subaru. Anyone who heard this, would have had no choice but to give up on any further questioning.

Then, what passed through Subaru’s mind instead, was,

[Subaru: Come to think of it, your name..... I had heard it before coming here]

[Echidona:]

Echidona remained silent. In front of her, Subaru touched his forehead as he reflected on his memories. The name of Echidona, “The Witch of Greed”. Before coming to the “Sanctuary”, that name had stolen Subaru’s ears several times.

[Subaru: ...from Puck]

In the loops that started in the Capital, Subaru had been killed by that Great Spirit three times. His most abhorrent and bitter memory was the time the gigantic Puck killed him as he mocked him.

That time, in Petelgeuse and Puck’s conversation, her name had appeared. On the verge of death, Subaru’s consciousness had not understood what it meant, and he had not remembered it again until now.

Hearing Subaru’s mutters as he found this memory, Echidona lifted up her face.

[Echidona: Puck.....? You don’t mean, the cat spirit.....?]

[Subaru: ——!? Yeah, that’s right. The cat spirit. Do you know Puck?]

[Echidona: It’s not whether I know him..... did he come here? If that’s case, just how much does he remember?]

Echidona seemed shocked to hear this unexpected name, and Subaru was just as shocked to see this reaction from her. Echidona, who had been talking non-stop up to now, suddenly fell silent.

Seeing her ominous attitude, Subaru couldn’t say a thing. And Echidona, as if sinking into thought again, shut her eyes in deep contemplation.

Wondering how would he continue this conversation, Subaru turned up his gaze,

[Subaru: ——Gaah!?]

All of sudden, in the bottom of his stomach, a searing heat asserting its own existence drew the entirety of his consciousness.

[Subaru: ...uh, ah?]

The tremendous heat felt as if it would burn through his entrails. Groaning, Subaru held his stomach, his legs trembling feebly.

The abrupt, surging pain was beyond anything ordinary. A stomachache would be nothing compared to this mysterious anguish that made him foam at the mouth. Unable to stand, he fell to his knees, and, in the next moment, dropped to the side.

Seeing Subaru like this,

[Echidona: Ah, it's finally taken effect]

And, admiring the sight with her cold, unfeeling eyes, Echidona gazed down at him.

Slowly, she approached the writhing Subaru, bent down her knees to get closer to his face, and brushed aside the hair over Subaru's forehead,

[Echidona: When you're invited to a Witch's tea party, you shouldn't be putting everything you've been given into your mouth so carelessly. ——You've learned a lesson now, haven't you?]

[Subaru: You, di... you poison me.....?]

[Echidona: Out of the question. I told you, didn't I? What you drank were my body fluids. A part of a fundamentally different existence, a part of a Witch. That, is what you consumed]

Body fluids. Subaru realized he had overlooked the significance of that term in all the conversation that came afterwards. And the consequence, was this state of his current agony.

Opening his eyes, he glared at Echidona. All the friendly attitude of before had long evaporated. Just what did she want to achieve by doing such a thing——

[Echidona: I don't want you to misunderstand, I didn't do this out of malice or any ill-will towards you. In fact, I regard your existence quite positively. Letting you drink a part of me is proof of that]

[Subaru: Sp...eak so I can... under...stand.....]

[Echidona: To put it simply, I lent you a hand so the dormant Witch Genes inside you could assimilate more easily..... or something along those lines]

[Subaru: Witch, Genes.....?]

The incessant heat growing in intensity, Subaru used every last ounce of his strength to repeat that word.

——Witch Genes.

That word too, he had heard several times before.

There was Petelgeuse. And then there was Beatrice.

[Echidona: You killed an agent of the “Witch of Envy”, didn't you? With that agent's death, the Witch Gene implanted itself inside you..... However,there seems to be something else inside you as well]

[Subaru: That thing, when it assimilates.....what'll happen?]

[Echidona: Indeed, whatever would happen? Honestly, I am not sure myself. But, compared to carrying around a bomb that blows up who knows when, it's better to detonate it before it causes anything worse, I think. If we can settle this inside a dream, perhaps it'll make the undetonated part easier to deal with once you're outside]

Listening to that indifferent tone, Subaru felt like his consciousness was about to fade, as light and dark flashed before his eyes in sync with the surging of his pain. But even in this state, Subaru slightly raised his arm, and pointed toward Echidona,

[Subaru: Just now, I thought of something.....]

[Echidona: Hm?]

[Subaru: You... the way you talk.....is, just like Puck. That cat spirit too, doesn't care about the mood at all, just goes around with that careless air, goes on like there's nothing.....]

Listening to Subaru's wrenched out words, for an instant, Echidona blinked in surprise. Then, with an exaggerated expression, as though she had just heard the funniest joke, Echidona held her stomach as she burst out laughing.

[Echidona: Haha! Hahaha! Aaah, that is quite, a good one! You are fascinating. I really think so. Mmm, mha, aaahahahaha! Is that so, me and Puck? Mmmm, you're quite right. That would be only natural, of course. I'm probably the only one who'd take him as something of a role model]

[Subaru: What, are y——]

Though he wanted to continue his sentence, it was no longer something he could do. The pain had set his entire body ablaze, yet it would not deprive him of his consciousness. It had felt as though it would continue forever, and there would be no respite from this anguish, but... the end was already nearing.

Though, it was not by overcoming the pain, but rather,

[Echidona: The time for our tryst is almost up, it seems]

Little by little, in Subaru's eyes, the outlines of the world began to blur.

The blue sky, and the little hill in the green grass-covered fields. The two of them, and the chairs surrounding a white table. All these images blended into one, and together, began to fade.

[Subaru: I thought you said it'll only end when you want it to end.....]

[Echidona: We have reached the limit of the time in the real world. The “Trials” you mentioned, it seems they will begin soon. When it does begin, all the functions of this Tomb will be directed towards it. And it won’t be caring about the lonely ghost anymore]

Saying this in a lighthearted voice, Echidona caressed Subaru’s forehead as he lay on the ground.

Watching him unable to resist, or even to react, she laughed.

[Echidona: Now, to return from a Witch’s tea party. What toll would you like to pay?]

[Subaru:Just so you know, I’m broke as hell right now]

[Echidona: Not money. The price is..... ah yes. You are forbidden to speak of this space to anyone else, how about that? You seem to already have another contract just like it too... it is a small price to pay, is it not?]

What is that supposed to mean, there was no time to even ask that question.

Pressing her finger against Subaru’s forehead, she whispered something quietly. Then, sensing a heat coming from the finger that was touching him, in an instant, it spread throughout his entire body. And, incredibly, Subaru was granted an understanding.

Of the terms of the contract, and what must not be infringed upon: thus, the one-sided agreement was sealed.

[Subaru: Doing this, without even asking first.....!]

[Echidona: Our conversation, and consolidating the Witch Genes. Compared to that, I think this is a very small price to pay. Also, might as well while we’re at it, I will grant you a gift]

Smiling at the indignant Subaru, another wave of heat passed from her finger to his forehead.

And, the result of this heat was——

[Echidona: I hereby grant you the qualification to participate in the Trials of this Tomb]

[Subaru: ——!?!]

[Echidona: With this, you will be able to take the Trials in this Tomb tonight. Whether you wish to take part is up to you. It is fine if you choose not to. But, if you want to, you could choose to take the Trials in place of the girl who is so very important to you. ——What you do with it, you may decide as you like]

The collapse of the world had begun. And little by little, what lay beneath his feet dissolved into darkness.

This time, the true end of the world was drawing near.

Then, in the world that was coming to an end, Subaru, still lying on the ground, looked up at Echidona.

Sealing a contract he did not wish to sign, extorting from him a price he did not wish to pay, the girl who was smiling at him without a care in the world——ah, without a doubt,

[Subaru: ——you, really, are a Witch]

[Echidona: ——Oh, but of course. I'm one evil Sorceress, isn't that right?]

With that final farewell, Subaru's consciousness sprang from the dream.

Falling, and falling. Fading, and fading.

Breaking out of the dream, floating upwards,

At last, Subaru's consciousness—— was released from the Witch's dreams.

Chapter 13 [Roswaal's Intentions]

The first thing Subaru felt when he woke up was someone's fingertip against his forehead.

[Subaru: Judging from the delicate softness and the really considerate contact, it's: Emilia-tan's!]

[Emilia: ——Even though you got it right, I got a reeeeaally spooky feeling about it, maybe it's just my imagination]

Opening his eyes, Subaru's field of vision was covered by the palm which was touching him. Through the gaps between her fingers, Subaru got a peek at a fragment of her beautiful face, and he loosened his lips, smiling.

[Subaru: Well, because only Emilia-tan would go to the trouble of taking care of me at a time like this, so I got the feeling it was you. It's not like anyone could actually tell who it is just by the touch of a fingertip, you know?]

[Emilia: Oh, I see. I guess feel a bit relieved now..... your body, can you sit up on your own?]

[Subaru: One way or another..... yeah, I'm fine]

Answering with a joke as he woke, Subaru sat himself up from the bed. Briefly looking around at his surroundings, he found himself in an unfamiliar building.

The bedding he had been lying on was crudely made, and couldn't compare at all with the beds of Roswaal's Mansion that he had gotten so used to. In any case, Subaru tried to remember what had happened before he lost consciousness.

[Subaru: Up to where did reality end, and from where did the vision begin.....]

The Tomb —— setting one foot in that place, and immediately being swept into a state of falling: that was the last thing he remembered about real world. Then after that, his

meeting with the girl playing-innocent inside the Tomb——with the “Witch of Greed”, if a Witch’s words could be believed, would have all happened inside her dreams.

It was all too vague. Frustrated by his indecisive memories, Subaru held a hand to his forehead and looked toward Emilia. Beside the bed, seated in a chair, she seemed to be quietly waiting for Subaru to sort out his thoughts. Seeing her there, Subaru began with [Well then.....],

[Subaru: There are loads of things I want to ask and and talk to you about..... but, first there’s something I have to say]

[Emilia: En, what is it?]

Tilting her head a little, Emilia waited adorably, listening. ——but, her eyes weren’t smiling.

Under the light gleaming from her clear, violet pupils, Subaru shrank his shoulders, [Subaru: I’m sorry I made you worry again. I got a bit too carried away there]

Having thought that he should, at the very least, be able to clear the path ahead of Emilia, he had somewhat overestimated his ability.

And the situation, as it turns out, was that on the first step he took he fell on his face.

Receiving Subaru’s apology, Emilia let out a little sigh through her lips.

[Emilia: You know. I was really really worried. The moment you went in, you let out a shriek and passed out]

[Subaru: Putting the shriek aside for now... I passed out?]

[Emilia: The white of your eyes were turned up, and you wouldn’t stop convulsing. We really didn’t know what to do. There weren’t any wounds and it didn’t look like there had been any strange magic cast you.....]

Seeing Emilia hesitating with her words, Subaru got an idea of what an embarrassing display he had made.

So that's what happened... Apparently, immediately after he stepped into the Tomb, when the floor collapsed——or by the time he sensed himself falling, he had already been summoned into the Witch of Greed's dreams.

And in reality, Subaru fell asleep the moment he walked in, and basically gave Emilia an uncalled-for amount of worry while she looked on, unable to do anything.

Scouting ahead for dangers for the sake of Emilia—— his determination back then was now looking really stupid at this point.

Thinking that, Subaru scowled up his face in self loathing, when,

[Garfiel: ——Oh? Hey, he's awake isn't he? Lookin' pretty good there, oy]

Saying this, pushing open the creaking door, the blond youth—— Garfiel walked in.

Taking a passing glance at Subaru on the bed, he then turned his gaze toward Emilia.

[Garfiel: Told ya didn't I? Nothin' wrong with his body, see?]

[Emilia:But still, I still couldn't help but get worried. Not knowing why and seeing him suddenly collapsing like that. Even though I've kind of gotten used to it by now, getting used to something like that really isn't a good thing, is it?]

[Garfiel: Hah, c'mon, toughen up a bit. Panicking and getting all teary-faced as soon as y'saw this little buddy go down.... Like "yer face's more blue than Aomiguro" as they say]

[Emilia: Wha——!?!]

Listening to Garfiel's thoroughly boorish retort, Emilia pouted up her lips as her face turned bright red.

And as soon as he brought that last part up, Emilia jumped up from her chair with a squeal.

[Emilia: I-I wasn't teary-faced! I was worried and panicking, sure, but I wasn't.....]

[Garfiel: A-ah, rightright. It's a secret, a secret. Sorry sorry. But, it's not that bad... There's no need to hide it or anything]

[Emilia: It is that bad. I'm really worried that..... if he heard I was going to cry.....]

Trailing off in the middle of her rebuttal, Emilia sneaked a side-glance at Subaru.

Up to now, Subaru had been silently observing their conversation. In front of her gaze, what would the speechless Subaru say——

[Subaru: Hn? Ah, it's good, keep going. Please, please, eheheh. Is that so, ehheh, is that so. Emilia-tan was so worried about me that she was crying... is that so, eheheh]

[Emilia:somehow, I got a feeling Subaru would react like that]

Emilia slumped down her shoulders dejectedly. In front of her, Subaru was still breathing heavily with enlarged nostrils. To know that the girl he has a crush on had been worried about him from the bottom of her heart, even if this was indiscreet, he couldn't hold in his glee.

Seeing Subaru's immodest indulgence and Emilia's reaction, on the side, Garfiel let out a [Ohhh so that's how it is] and then, with deep feeling, muttered,

[Garfiel: This time's my bad. Yikes, it's pretty rare. To see me ownin' up to my mistakes so straightforwardly, ain't it?]

And, in self-reflection, Garfiel admitted something he's not all too proud of.

※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※

[If properly trained, even dogs can exercise enough self-restraint to not eat before being given permission]

Chilling, it was a voice instilled with such sharpness that one might be cut in half if one were to touch it.

Echoing out slowly, there was a pause between each word, but the space in between was filled with such dreadfulness that no room for objection was permitted from the other end. [That is to say, following an instruction the way even a dog is capable of, should have been the least you could do]

Kuts *kuts*, were the high pitched sound of footsteps striking the wooden floor.

The rhythm of the steps were constant, walking left and right, back and forth in front of him.

The evenness of the gaps between them reflected the calmness of the footsteps' owner's mind, all the while knowing full well that they were mercilessly chipping away at the mental composure of the other person.

[Now——]

The voice and the footsteps, and those eyes devoid of emotion, all shot toward Subaru——

[Ram: A creature that can't abide by instructions that even a dog can abide by, what do you even call such a thing? Barusu, do you know?]

[Subaru: I'm so sorry I didn't follow your advice——!!]

Toward the small girl standing opposite him, Subaru fell to his knees on the spot and bent his head all the way down as he cried out in apology.

However, against the wailing from the bottom of Subaru's soul, girl only slightly tilted her head.

[Ram: "I'm so sorry", did you hear me asking for an apology? Not only did you not hear the question, it seems you didn't hear anything at all so far. I think Ram's advice didn't even enter your ears in the first place, because it's not like it was something you couldn't have understood]

[Subaru: Can you please not use such a roundabout way to express your distaste!? I repent, I totally know I was wrong, but it feels like my heart is getting crushed! A straightforward scolding would've been easier on me!]

[Ram: It'd be better if you died]

[Subaru: Too straightforward!!]

Receiving the girl——Ram's merciless rebuke, Subaru hugged his head on the floor. But actually, considering his conduct, he could only receive all her abuse with resignation. He had flat out gone against her especially delivered warning, and caused trouble for everyone around him as a result.

[Roswaal: Tha~~t's alright. Ram should forgi~ve him there. A~~fter all, Emilia-sama must have already given him the exact same lecture, no? Going over it again wo~n't do much good, except making Subaru-kun's masochist tendencies exci~ted]

[Subaru: I don't have masochist tendencies. Stepping on landmines just happens to be my natural instinct!]

It was just him not being able to read the mood very well, he was thinking.

Seeing Subaru puffing up his chest boastfully, Ram gave up in the bottom of her heart as she let out a deep sigh, and then, without a word, she turned her back to him, to face toward Roswaal.

And Roswaal, shifting his body to face everyone waiting silently by his side as he lay on the bed, continued, [Well~ then],

[Roswaal: Fir~~st of all, that you all came back safe is the most important thing. These stumbles before the Trials had sent all kinds of pla~ns into disarray. Even though Subaru-kun's action was a nothing but a simple blu~nder]

Having been tossed an all-too-meaningful smile, Subaru crossed his arms and made a small snort. And, as if with a reproachful attitude, Emilia, who was standing beside him, pinched Subaru under his ribs.

[Subaru: Ow. Hurts, Emilia-tan]

[Emilia: Even though I always defend you, today it's Subaru who's been bad..... If I had known that Ram had said something like that I would have...]

....stopped Subaru from going first, as if trying to continue like this, Emilia's words trailed off. Smiling wryly back at her, Subaru muttered [That's why I couldn't tell you...] in his heart. If she knew about this warning beforehand, Emilia would never have allowed Subaru to take on such a dangerous task.

But on the other hand, if it weren't for Ram's warning, Subaru wouldn't have made up his mind about trying to clear the way for Emilia in the first place. So then...

[Subaru: Your advice didn't make anyone happy, Ram]

[Ram: Saying all of this was because of Ram, only a dog would do that..... No, I should change that to lower than a dog, otherwise it would be insulting to dogs]

Seeing Subaru trying to pass off responsibility, Ram shot back with a look of ultimate contempt. He couldn't help but admire the maid's undissipating venomous attitude. And, at the same time, the other side probably held a similar opinion of Subaru as well.

Leaving the two's irrelevant sparring aside, Roswaal rearranged his legs on the bed, and, [Roswaal: By the way, Emilia-sama..... How did you like the Tomb?]

[Emilia:With what happened to Subaru, I didn't get a chance look around. But, there was a terrible stench in the air and I felt this unpleasant stinging feeling on my skin]

Emilia furrowed her brows as she put her impression of the Tomb into words.

Basically, bad impressions took up most of her overall appraisal of the place. And hearing this unreservedly negative appraisal, Roswaal let out an [Is that so...], and slightly smiled.

Then, his mismatched eyes set upon a corner of the room—— toward Garfiel, who had been observing their conversation, leaning against a wall.

[Roswaal: Garfiel. Has the Qualification been confirmed?]

At the word Qualification, Subaru raised his brows, and looked toward Garfiel.

The blonde youth roughly scratched his short hair, and revealed his sharp canine fangs.

[Garfiel: I didn't go further than the front of the entrance but.....the lights in the Tomb turned on alright. Emilia-sama's got the "Qualification", there's no doubt 'bout that]

[Subaru: Lights in the Tomb?]

Hearing something he hadn't heard of before, Subaru tilted his head as Garfiel flapped his hand around irritably.

[Garfiel: There's a bunch of candle-things in the Tomb. While the Sun's up, if a guy with Qualification walks into the Tomb, some stuff in there'll make the fires light up. A guy who gets this welcome without any problems will be qualified to take that night's Trials]

[Roswaal: Conversely, if someone without Qualification forces his way into the Tomb, it would be just like what happened to Subaru and myself]

Finishing off Garfiel's words for him, Roswaal spread out his arms. It was to show off his body, which was still painfully wrapped in blood soaked bandages. ——That is, to show off the punishment for forcing one's way into the Tomb.

[Subaru: I feel like the severity of the punishment is pretty different between what you got and what I got... Compared to just going in like me, what you did must've been quite a lot worse, right?]

[Roswaal: Worse, such as what?]

[Subaru: Illegally peeing beside the entrance or something. That'll really piss off the Tomb manager]

[Roswaal: If that were the ca~se, Subaru would have fallen ri~ght where my puddle had be~en, it se~ems]

His sarcasm being countered by another sarcastic reply, Subaru showed a disgusted face as he quickly patted himself off all over his clothes. Seeing Subaru's reaction, Roswaal relaxed his cheeks, and said [Bu~t], shaking his head,

[Roswaal: The fact that we suffered different damages despite being similarly rejected.....I~'m impressed you noticed it. It's true, my i~njuries are quite a lot greater than Subaru's. But, the reason is very simple]

[Emilia:Mana ...Gate rampage]

Roswaal's words were interrupted by this answer.

Turning to the voice, it was Emilia, who had been covering her lips with her fingers. She was thinking with downcast eyes, and playing with the tips of her silver hair.

[Emilia: When I entered the Tomb, I felt a reeeaally unpleasant air about the place. It felt like my Gate was being interfered with or something. Maybe because I met the requirements, it decided to let me go.....but if it's someone who doesn't meet the requirement, the interference would bare its fangs]

There was a change in the certainty of her words, and little by little, her tone became imbued with strength. Emilia lifted up her face, and those violet pupils took in Roswaal's pitiful form.

[Emilia: The interference strikes at its targets through their gates.....Which means, the greater the number of gates the person has, the greater the interference they will receive]

[Roswaal: Perfect answer. Wi~th someone like myself.....that I didn't blow up is a mi~~racle]

Casually saying something scary again, Roswaal flashed a glance at Subaru with a single eye, and said [It's a good thing you have no talent], rather annoyingly.

[Subaru: So basically, magic users or any talented people would almost die from that. But all I got was loss of consciousness, so it's a good thing that I'm so totally inept as a magic user, huh...]

[Emilia: T-that's true but.....describing yourself like that, doesn't it sting a little?]

[Subaru: I've gotten pretty used to knowing that there are things I can't do and things I can't reach. It's alright, I'll just use the things only I can do to show my love for Emilia-tan. For now, how about we start with some rustic love whisperings?]

[Emilia: After the Royal Selection's finished and everything's settled down, maybe I'll consider it]

[Subaru: At least 3 years later!?!]

Even then there's no guarantee whether she will listen...

At the cruel Emilia, Subaru shriveled his shoulders. Then, with a [But,] he continued,

[Subaru: Putting the qualifications and whatnot aside, a space that kills magic users... I don't know who's behind it, but it sounds like pretty asshole thing to do... don't know how else to describe it]

[Roswaal: Considering it has been managed by generations of the Mathers family, the one who assembled the magical mechanism must have been one of my ancestors]

[Subaru: Ah, that's not good..... is it. But then, wait... then doesn't that mean you're a way-too-accurate impression of your ancestors? Like it's reincarnating through Ros-chi's family-line or something]

What if when one generation dies, the next generation gets possessed by the asshole consciousness of its predecessor, and so on and so on like a puppet family-line...

Just the thought of it was too frightening, and Subaru quickly shook his head to put it out of his mind. But hearing Subaru's words, Roswaal laughed as if having heard quite a joke, [Roswaal: There are families who researched that kind of ma~gic, a~lthough, they have been defeated, and extinguished lo~ng ago..... And also, while you *could* call it a "space that kills mages", there is a more accurate name for it]

[Subaru: Which... is?]

[Roswaal: Simply put ——that place is filled with the Witch's Miasma. A nightmarish environment, that passes Mana through the trespasser's Gate, and drives him to madness. That, is what is ca~lled Miasma]

Miasma, Subaru furrowed his brows at the appearance of this word, as if searching for a memory of something he had heard before. Indeed, he had heard that word from——

[Subaru: The story of the Witch of Envy... The place where she was sealed, is covered in that Miasma, or something.....]

[Roswaal: Yo~gu, you know about that, don't you. We~ll, it is a very fa~mous story. Even now, the Sealing Stone Temple where the Witch of Envy is sleeping is covered in Miasma so thick that it distorts everything in one's view. If that Miasma rejects those who do not meet her Tomb's conditions, the Miasma invades the minds of anyone it touches, annihilates their flesh, and corrupts their soul, a phenomenon of true and genuine malice. Even the faithful adherents of the Witch Cult who seek to revive the Witch of Envy, are not able to approach it, or so the sto~ry goes]

[Subaru: Even the Witch Cult guys can't go in huh.....Then again, of course they can't. If they can just walk right in and plonk the seal off with everyone watching they'll win, won't they]

The Witch's resurrection——he remembered Petelgeuse, screaming that supreme objective.

Even that madman, single-mindedly crying out his conceited love, could take no direct actions to actually save the Witch. It was probably out of consideration of the fact that his true form was a spirit also meant that he would be powerless in the face of the Miasma. [Roswaal: A~nyhow, because of that, the Witch's Seal is made unapproachable by the Witch's own Miasma. And on top of that, if one wishes to approach the Temple, one would have to be sneak past the watchful eyes of the Sage Shaula in the Wa~tchtower]

[Subaru: I've heard of that name, the Sage Shaula. That's the second Sage I know of... Flugel, and then there's Shaula]

How did they come to be called by this title, Subaru wondered. Perhaps there was something about them that was different from everyone else? Seeing Subaru's doubts, Roswaal lightly smiled,

[Roswaal: Flugel, you mean, tha~t big-tree Flugel? Whi~~le it's true he's also called a Sage, comparing him with Sage Shaula wo~uld be a little harsh]

[Subaru: Why's that? They're both Sages, you shouldn't be playing Sage favourites. I owe Flugel-san quite a bit you know, so don't go insulting Flugel-san in front of me now]

No matter what, that Sage lent him a pretty big hand when they were battling the White Whale.

Flugel-san probably never imagined that 400 years later the tree he planted would come in handy for defeating monsters. Whether he'd be happy about it though would be a different matter.

[Subaru: With a tree that huge, the broken off part could probably used for all sorts of things.....well, there's a chance it got blown up by the time bomb though?] ****In the WN Subaru woke up in a dragon carriage on the way to the Capital, instead of a grassfield like in the Anime, so he didn't see what happened to the tree*

[Roswaal: I~ get the feeling that's not the only bro~ken thing we'll need to de~al with. Anyway.....Emilia-sama]

Shifting his gaze from Subaru, who had been holding his chin in his hand, Roswaal turned to Emilia, as he this quiet call. Hearing this, Emilia lifted her face, and answered [En],

[Roswaal: To return to the topic at hand, more than anything, it is go~od that you are Qualified. That means Emilia-sama may take the Trials of the Tomb. In that case, there is just one thing I have to ask]

Solemn and low, the mischievous tone had vanished from Roswaal's voice. Taking this in, Emilia also looked back with a serious gaze, watching him in return,

[Roswaal: Simply put—— Are you willing to accept the Trials?]

As the short question fell into the room, Emilia's pressed together her lips and became silent.

Of course, this was only natural. Whether she had the Qualification to take the Trials had already been confirmed. So naturally, it would be followed by this next question. But, [Subaru: Before she answers, I just want to ask. The Trials, are they something that she absolutely must take?]

Before Emilia could voice her answer, one step ahead of her, Subaru raised his hand. Hearing this question, at Roswaal's side, a dangerous emotion settled within Ram's pupils, but Roswaal lifted a hand to stop her.

[Roswaal: I thought this was so~mething you would a~sk. Without taking the Trials, those with Qualification will not be able to leave the Sanctuary. This much, you must have already heard from Ga~rfiel?]

[Subaru: So I've heard. But, that's not really a reason Emilia-tan must take it, is it? The Gravesite of the Witch of Greed is a foul place, there's no knowing what kind of dangerous things could happen in there. Sending an important Royal Selection candidate, Emilia-tan into such a place, just what are you thinking?]

[Roswaal: O~mu. We~ll, as fair arguments go, it is a fair a~rgument. If we simply needed someone to take the Trials the~n, there are others who are qualified..... If that was all, it'd be just as well if Garfiel di~d it]

[Garfiel: Hah? Me? I'm good with that. I'd challenge the Trials and break right through, it'll be like "Barubarumoa-right-right-left" and I'm passed yeah?]

Like stirring water, Garfiel gestured toward himself with his thumb with a smile that bared his teeth. Seeing how Garfiel only seemed to have heard the second half of what was said, Subaru ignored his simple-minded remarks and tried to focus on the more reliable aspects of his statement.

Actually, it would be nice if the Trials was something anyone can beat, because then there would be no need for Emilia to do it. Then, it'd be nice if someone qualified and more dependable could challenge it.

——In the worst case, having been granted Qualification to challenge the Trials, it'd also be fine if Subaru did it.

[???: ——Nyaa, that'd be a lil problematic]

It was a sudden voice from the entrance of the house that didn't belong to anyone present. With his back to the door, Subaru jerked around his head in surprise as he heard the unfamiliar voice. Now taking Subaru's gaze, Garfiel, who was leaning against a wall beside the door, slightly waved his hand in front of his face.

[Garfiel: Wasn' me, 's that old hag over there]

Saying so, he gestured with the hand he was waving with toward his side. Setting his sight there, Subaru saw beside Garfiel's scrawny body an even smaller shadow standing there.

[???: Who's an old hag. Never at a loss for words, what a rotten kid I've raised]

With pink, long drooping hair, a tiny little girl said with a very grown-up attitude.

With perfectly formed features, it was a little girl with a cute face. Her age seemed to be

around Petra's, about 11 or 12 years old. Her pink hair had waves in them, and its soft texture gave off a light and fluffy impression. Wearing a loose, white robe that grew larger the lower down it got, with long dangling sleeves that left no place for her hands to come out, she had an impish look about her.

Above all, judging from the way she was addressing Garfiel...

[Subaru: Even though I always thought it would show up one day, I didn't think it'd show up here, the Loli-Granny.....!]

[??? : Wha's that, I get the feeling I've just been called something totally against my will, or is that just me?]

[Emilia: Umm, I often hear Subaru use "Loli" on Beatrice.....so it means "little", right?]

Seeing Subaru's astonishment, the little girl looked up at him with a displeased expression on her face.

Just from Emilia's mumbles, her modern day knowledge was proof of how high her experience-points in her interactions with Subaru had been. Listening to this, Subaru raised up a finger.

[Subaru: Yep, Emilia-tan's correct. More specifically though, it means little children outside of my conquest-range. Combining this Loli together with Granny, we have what looks like a little girl on the outside but containing a granny within, completing a miraculous COLLABORATION! Even though I don't really go for Lolis in the first place, I do understand the subtleties of the Gap-Moe!]

[Emilia: Gyappumoe?]

[Subaru: A girl who's usually like an awe-inspiring older sister but in some places really childish and lacking some really common knowledge or just straight-up being easy to trick would also be considered Gap-Moe!]

Listening to Subaru's string of words in rapid succession, Emilia, with [So there are girls like that.....], brought a finger to her lips with an expression as if she was taking this in. While Emilia being unaware of how the characteristics were referring to herself was unbearably adorable, the other person being addressed by these words was looking annoyed,

[???: Then? I don't know what this Loli is, and what's with you keep calling me granny granny? For a first meeting, you're a guy who's even ruder than Ros-bo here] **-bo is like when an granny refers to a grandson with endearment*

[Subaru: Oooo, that was rude of me, Mademoiselle. My name is Natsuki Subaru! Currently a heart-throb Mabeast-Hunter. Well, even though it usually isn't me dealing the last-hits]

High-spiritedly announcing his name with a thumbs-up, the self-introduction tapered off a bit toward the end. And then, extending a hand toward the girl with the distrustful face, [And you are?] he prompted,

[Subaru: Now that I've told you my name I hope you can introduce yourself as well. A simple PROFILE, interests x special abilities. Mentioning some of your CHARM-POINTS as well would be great] **With words like "charm-points", Subaru is speaking English*

[Lewes:Lewes Meyer. In a way, I am a representative of this Sanctuary]

Listening to Subaru's jests, the Loli-Granny—the one who called herself Lewes, extended a finger through her sloppy sleeves and scratched herself on her forehead,

[Lewes: I didn't notice it when you were sleeping, but more than just rude you're a poor lil rascal. I get the feeling like I shouldn't have bothered lending you the bed]

[Subaru: The bed, the one I was sleeping on just now?]

[Emilia: Yes, that was Lewes-san's house. It was close to the Tomb, so Garfiel carried you there..... really, thank you so much for earlier]

Then, seeing Emilia lowering her head, Lewes shook her head slowly. Judging from that exchange, the two of them seemed to have already met while Subaru was unconscious. Either way, it was true that she had helped him out.

[Subaru: I didn't know it was like that, sorry for the rude things I said. The bed, lending it to me helped me a great deal. I've been late to say this, really really sorry!]

[Lewes:Wha was that, scared me. Gar-bo never apologizes straightforwardly like that. Natsuki.....Subaru, was it? It'll be Su-bo then]

[Subaru: That sounds a bit like the beginning of a Weather Forecast, but that's ok. In turn, let me call you Lewes-san then] *ヤン坊マー坊天気予報 "*Yan-bo Ma-bo Weather Forecast*" was a cartoon shown before weather forecasts in Japan that ran from 1959-2014

After he had expressed his thanks, Lewes's annoyed expression was cancelled. As they peacefully decided on what to call each other, Subaru continued with [So then...]

[Subaru: So Lewes-san, just now you said there'd be a problem, what was it? Garfiel taking the Trials would be problematic?]

[Lewes: You sure changed your tone quickly. Aah, that. It'd be a problem, quite a big one. Basically, if those who originate from the Sanctuary challenge the Trials, it would violate the Contract] ****聖域の出身者* is like "someone with a background of the Sanctuary", it's meant to be vague here

[Subaru: Contracts again.....]

With all the Contracts and Pacts popping up, restricting this and that, Subaru shot a sickened look at Roswaal. And, receiving that look, Roswaal shrugged,

[Roswaal: U~~nfortunately, this Contract has nothing to do with the Mathers family..... well I shouldn't say no~thing to do with, but we were no~t the main culprit. I~~ mean, my family had something of a suppo~rting role in it]

[Subaru: Your defense statement is all good, now cough it up. The detailed contents of the Contract, in three sentences]

[Roswaal: So strict. Well to put it simply, the condition for the liberation of the inhabitants of the Sanctuary is to pass the Trials, but the Trials may only be challenged by someone from the outside who possess the Qualifications. That is to say, the situation right now is.....]

[Emilia: I am the only one who can do it, is that right?]

Understanding at the end of Roswaal's explanation, Emilia finished off his words. Roswaal nodded in confirmation, and turned to look toward Lewes.

[Roswaal: In fact, this is the understanding of the inhabitants of the Sanctuary. They expect that Emilia-sama would challenge the Trials, and hope that Emilia-sama could overcome it]

[Emilia: I don't want you to think I am hesitating when I ask this..... but, hypothetically, if someone other than me challenges the Trials, what would happen?]

Emilia's violet pupils turned to Garfiel, and asked this hypothetical question. And, it was Lewes who replied, saying [As for that],

[Lewes: Up to now, at least for as long as I have been alive, no one has ever challenged the Trials. So there is no way to say. Residents or outsiders alike, no one has yet challenged it]

[Subaru: No one, up to now? I'm afraid to ask but, Lewes-san... how old are you?]

Judging from the common setting of Loli-Grannies, the answer to Subaru's question just now could be something really scary. But actually, Lewes said [Not like that], and then, as if looking toward something far away,

[Lewes: At least I don't know of the time when this place was first created. But at most, I think, it would be a hundred and ten-odd years]

[Subaru: Too much! At least, that's the oldest out of everyone I've met so far]

Well, if you put Spirits and the spiritual-bodied Witch aside.

Taking in that side note, Subaru turned a worried look at Emilia. But even under that gaze, the tinge of darkness in Emilia's expression did not leave her.

[Emilia: In any case, I understand now. Either way, if I don't pass the Trials I won't be able to leave the Sanctuary. So I will accept]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan's heroic look when making a resolve is super-captivating, but maybe it's better if we look into some more cautious strategies? Find some shortcuts or loopholes first, and it won't be too late to do the challenge then, I think]

[Emilia: You shouldn't pour water on someone just when they've got so pumped up and all, it's reeeaaaally inappropriate I think]

But, while Subaru was just trying to place her far away from any possibility of danger, Emilia pouted up her lips with a look of disapproval. And receiving her reproachful gaze,

[Subaru: Come to think of it, isn't there something fishy about how we got taken along for a ride like this? I can't get rid of the feeling that something's off, actually. This whole situation just seems too well set-up, like everything along the road's been arranged and now even the traffic police is in on it]

[Emilia: I totally can't understand that. Subaru says some reeeaaaally befuddling things sometimes]

[Subaru: I haven't heard anyone say befuddle in a while.....]

Seeing Emilia sharpen her gaze at the customary exchange between them, Subaru hurriedly flapped his hands around saying [No no no],

[Subaru: Nevermind that part, I meant I got a really strong feeling that this whole situation has been prearranged somehow. The half-bloods not being able to leave, and then nominating Emilia-tan to step-up and all. And then to say that it's all already understood and agreed upon]

[Emilia: Prearranged, by who?]

[Subaru: Who, it could only be one person]

At Emilia's question, right then and there Subaru did a sudden spin. And at the end of the rotation his finger pointed toward...

[Subaru: You, wasn't it?]

[Garfiel: Huh? Me?]

[Subaru: Ah, wrong one, sorry, turned too far. This one this one — You, wasn't it, Roswaal]

[Roswaal: Nothing could have been slo~ppier]

Smiling bitterly, Roswaal gave his assessment of Subaru's movements. But immediately he closed a single eye, and projected Subaru within his yellow pupil,

[Roswaal: Ho~wever, your observation is good as usual. It's true, I had ho~ped for this situation and bro~ught it about. Of course, I didn't have a hand in the sta~ge itself, though]

[Subaru: I get the feeling, I understand now]

Raising up his brows at Roswaal's words, Subaru seemed to have grasped his intentions. Kept out of the conversation, Emilia showed a confused expression, and tried to listen for what was happening behind it all.

[Subaru: First, I think it's odd that Roswaal got injured. In the first place, you must have known that you weren't Qualified for the Trials. This should be obvious considering this place is managed by the Mathers family, and that you are acquainted with Garfiel]

[Roswaal: That is.....right. En, correct]

[Subaru: If that's the case, Roswaal would know what would happen to him after he is rejected from the Tomb. In spite of this, why did Roswaal go in? Was it rage against the world for no particular reason? Or has he finally reached the limits of holding back his Masochist tendencies? Even though both of these are pretty persuasive, I don't think it was either of them]

[Roswaal: O~~ay O~~ay. Is that the kind of impre~ssion Subaru-kun ha~s of me?]

Seeing Roswaal intentionally ignoring the main point with that reaction, Subaru lifted up a finger with [In other words],

[Subaru: Getting wounded like this was in accordance with Roswaals intentions, and had some kind of significance. And that significance would probably... be connected to the Royal Selection, I think]

[.....]

[Subaru: But I was hoping to ask... The villagers of Arlam village, they are gathered in some kind of a Cathedral right now, right?]

Subaru suddenly changed the topic, and turned to Ram, who was standing beside Roswaal. Keeping her silence, she lightly drew in her chin in a nod, and then,

[Ram: En, yes. The villagers are gathered in the Cathedral..... being confined by the residents of the Sanctuary]

[Subaru: Is that so, confined. Earlier, our conversation got cut off because we had to go visit the Tomb, but..... just what kind of confinement is it. And why was it necessary for the Sanctuary guys to place Roswaal along with all the villagers under house arrest?]

The one Subaru turned to next, was Gafiel, who was still leaning against the wall. His eyes narrowed, and grew sharpened at Subaru's question, and followed it with [It's obvious ain't it]

[Garfiel: Telling ya, this here ain't us grabbin onto a way out'a troubled times. But we ain't exactly in a good mood when the Lord-sama and his tag-alongs just comes like it's fine to set our problems aside and use this place as they like y'know?]

[Subaru: By your problems you mean of course.....]

[Lewes: That it is impossible for us to leave this Sanctuary for the outside world]

Continuing from Subaru's words, Lewes finished his sentence. A dark and burdened expression unbecoming of her youthful face descended, as she cast down her eyes, and continued in a thin voice,

[Lewes: As I have said before, I have been alive for a hundred and some-decades. But, never once have I gone outside this Sanctuary. Anyhow, adhering to this contract since the time of my birth, I have been bound by this land. And precisely for that reason, it was half giving up.....and half refusing to let go of hope] **The first time, Lewes's age was 百十数年 meaning 110-119, and in this sentence Lewes said 百数十年 meaning 110-199. This may have been intentional, so I will keep it same as the Japanese*

[Garfiel: Granny'd like to get to see the outside world for a bit. Th'others too. Just to get chance to, it's something worth biting onto yeah? Having the weakened Lord-sama, and villagers that we could take as hostages falling into our hands, 's gotten pretty convenient]

With Lewes and Garfiel's words, the atmosphere in the room suddenly turned.

In short, they have just told Subaru the reason for the confinement—— that is, confessed

the motive of their crime. The aspect that Subaru had not noticed up to now, was that the relationship between him, and them, had been that of a prisoner, and jailor. A relationship between the victim, and the perpetrator.

[Subaru: So it's, like that. You guys, are holding the villagers hostage.....in order to free yourselves from the Sanctuary]

[Lewes: You can think of it any way you like. And then, the one who can fulfill that condition is.....]

In an instant, Lewes's words clouded over, as she looked toward Emilia.

Taking in the meaning of that look, Emilia once again realized her position.

[Emilia: Me. ——That's what you mean isn't it?]

Understanding the flow of the situation, Emilia closed her eyes once more. And when, after several seconds, she opened them again, there were no longer any confused emotions in her eyes. There was only resolve, for she had made her decision.

[Emilia: The villagers, you haven't done anything terrible to them, have you?]

[Garfiel: 'Course not. If I treat them roughly I'd be taking my anger out on them. I'd rather die before I do something like that, sorry]

Just like that, Emilia's ability to place others before herself was beyond estimation. Even after deciding to face the unknown dangers of the Trials, she was already worrying about the villagers and the others.

It was her strength, and her fragileness, when she is like this, that made Subaru so drawn to her.

[Roswaal: That's an unsatisfied look on your face, i~~sn't it?]

[Subaru:That should be obvious. In the end, we still got taken along for the ride. Since we didn't notice it when we got on, now that we have noticed it we still have no choice but to keep riding]

Grinding his teeth holding in his vexation, Subaru put up a smiling look to bicker with Roswaal. But then, quietly remembering, he turned back again,

[Subaru: I forgot to mention, the reason you got wounded]

[Roswaal: En en, go on. I won't be marking you on it]

[Subaru: PERFORMANCE. Or rather, it was an opening gambit]

Seeing Subaru scratching his neck as he said this, Roswaal's expression slightly congealed. This reaction was all taken in by Subaru's single open eye.

[Subaru: Being placed in a state of confinement, the people of Arlam village probably didn't take it well. Naturally, they must have objected. So I think you had to show that something was being done. Being the Lord, it would've been great if you could just go nuts and chase Garfiel away or something..... But the people of the Sanctuary are your subject as well. So you couldn't really do that]

[Roswaal: Fumu. So, wha~t happened then?]

[Subaru: You could only swallow Garfiel and the residents' condition. That is, liberating the half-bloods of the Sanctuary. But this couldn't be done without Emilia-tan's assistance. Yet, the villagers and the residents wouldn't just accept that. So, the rest is simple—— You challenge the Trials, showing that you've accepted their requests, and that you intend to liberate them from their confinements]

[————]

[Subaru: I don't know how well you could have predicted how much damage you would take from the Miasma, but if you predicted it wouldn't kill you, then it's not really that much of a gamble. The greater the damage you take, the more serious it looks and the more sympathy you get. And, it sets up the expectations for the final act that will be coming after you]

So in the end, everything about Roswaal getting wounded had been a performance to further his intentions.

As their lord, the magnitude of Roswaal's power was well known to his subjects and the villagers of Arlam. If the Trials can injure a person like him so severely, what will they think of a person who then appears and overcame such a trial to save them?

[Subaru: That, was what I imagine happened judging from my impression of your malicious prejudiced opportunism, so how's that for an answer sheet?]

[Roswaal: —Ee~ya~, I~'m surprised. That was actually, really, re~ally astonishing. It's only been a few days, bu~t just wh~at on earth has happened to yo~u]

Roswaal laughed from the depths of his throat at Subaru's words, showering praises at him.

And, clapping his hands, with a smile clear as day pasted over his face,

[Roswaal: I~mpressive indeed. Almost a perfect a~nswer. I can't imagine how you could have read this far. A~fter all, I was right to have pi~cked you up]

[Subaru: The sky~~. I'm going to puke]

Seeing the thankful-looking Roswaal, as his deductions was being confirmed, Subaru looked away unable to hide the revulsion in his chest.

At Roswaal's intentions, at himself who had read into those intentions, at the fact that those intentions were for Emilia's benefit... and, the thought that, somewhere deep down, he himself approved of it, was all too revolting.

Oblivious to Subaru and Roswaal's skullduggery, Emilia was still occupied with Lewes and Garfiel and the topic about the Trials.

Watching her from behind, Subaru was determined that he would not let her hear these words, no matter what.

It would be enough if she just looked ahead.

Pristine, and noble, he would not want her to know of the dark intentions behind her.

If Subaru had to cover himself in mud so she could be showered with praise, it would be all be worth it.

In the Royal Selection, she hasn't done anything of note so far, and had no solid footing to stand on.

If her Royal Selection begins at this Sanctuary, he will do everything in his power to aid her.

With renewed determination, and firm resolve, Subaru decided.

Then, as he was clenching up his fists, behind Subaru, entrusting all his weight onto the bed,

[Roswaal:Almost, correct. Though that wasn't the only reason I e~ntered the Tomb]

Quietly whispering, it was in a voice that only the peach-colored haired maid beside the bed could hear, and, listening, only she alone cast down her pained gaze in reaction.



Chapter 14 [Questions And Answers]

[Roswaal: You felled the White Whale, and repelled the Witch Cult that had been targeting the Estate. Whether it was sealing an Alliance with Candidate Crusch-sama, or the aforementioned battle, your achievements have certainly grown—fu~mu]

Inadvertently laying more and more of his weight onto the bed, Roswaal touched his chin and closed his eyes. Uttering in his mouth, in this exchange with Subaru in the middle of the night, were all the various things that had occurred in his absence.

And Subaru, pressing down his bad habit of derailing the conversation, tried his best to eliminate the boasting and the tales of suffering, and had given what he thought was an objective explanation of the events. Then, looking back on his conducts once more,

[Ram:To put it bluntly, you seem to have done so much that it's starting to make me doubt whether your words are delusional. Since when did you become a character in an action-adventure stage play, Barusu?]

[Subaru: What you just said gave me a pretty subtle feeling I couldn't really explain, you know.....though, I'm also still wondering how I did all that myself. But whether it's by my own evaluations or other people's evaluations, it was no small contribution, was it?]

It was a result that even Kong-Ming wouldn't have dared to put together. And even under Ram's cold sarcasm, it seemed that she at least acknowledged the significance of Subaru's accomplishments. So bit by bit, his spirits rose. (**Kong Ming was an ancient military genius from the Chinese Three-Kingdoms period*)

[Roswaal: A result beyond all expectations, there is no o~ther way to put it. Su~ch an achievement, even I..... or, not even anyone, could have ima~gined it]

As if he had finally finished digesting his astonishment, Roswaal spoke these words of full of praise. Then, with a serious expression so rare to him, his mismatched eyes gazed into Subaru, who was sitting in a chair in front of his bed.

[Roswaal: Fi~rst, I want to once more convey my words of gra~titude. ——For protecting my land, and the people of my realm, you have my deepest gratitude]

[Subaru: Ah, ah oh. Yeah. How should I say this uh... hearing you say it like that kinda makes me wanna to curl up in a ball. It wasn't that big of a deal or anythi.....]

[Ram: It seems Barusu is a little, unable to grasp the gravity of your words of gratitude, Roswaal-sama]

As Subaru put a stop to Roswaal's courteous words of thanks, Ram took a step forward and interrupted. Her clear, unwavering eyes were looking down on him,

[Ram: Interrupting on your superior, and on top of that rejecting his words of thanks is in its essence unforgivable. Besides, as a Margrave, Roswaal-sama is someone who carries the power of an entire wing of the Kingdom of Lugnica. ——Words of gratitude from him holds far more weight than Barusu can imagine]

[———]

[Ram: From Roswaal-sama's position, he shouldn't even have to bother looking at someone beneath him, let alone offer words of gratitude. To have gone to such lengths, please have some consideration for its significance]

Like a slap in the face, Ram threw out these words that wiped off Subaru's over-optimistic thoughts. Listening to this, unable to come up with a single reply, Subaru hung his head. Then, saying [No~ no~], Roswaal lightly waved his hands as if to smooth things over,

[Roswaal: The way Ram said it was a bi~t too exaggerated. My words don't carry tha~t much value]

[Ram: Roswaal-sama]

Hearing Ram's concerned call, Roswaal nodded, and with [Ho~wever], he continued,

[Roswaal: Setting aside the weight of my gratitude due to my social standing for now, the weight of what Subaru-kun has accomplished is clear to anyone's eyes. As~ such, if I don't reward you appropriately, you can ea~sily imagine the disappointment and public outrage that would be directed to~wards me]

[Subaru:So then, what are you going to do for me?]

[Roswaal: A fitting reward. ——Subaru-kun, do you remember what happened in the Royal Selection Hall?]

Seeing Subaru's throat choking up, Roswaal narrowed his eyes.

As this gaze was piercing through him, what passed across Subaru's mind were the abominable memories that even now made his chest burn with shame and self-derision whenever he recalls them. The declaration he had made in that place, his reckless words, his lack of understanding, his lack of self-understanding... the laughable nonsense uttered by that foolish self, who had gotten even the most important thing wrong in his mind.

But still, even so——

[Subaru: I remember. It's not something I could ever forget.or should forget, I think]

[Roswaal: Then, as my reward for your actions, how about I make the words you said in that place into a reality. ——Rest assured, on the dawn when we leave this place, I shall appoint you as a Knight]

Lifting his head, for a moment, Subaru was unable to take in the meaning of those words. Seeing Subaru wavering, blinking, Roswaal nodded his head,

[Roswaal: Fighting alongside the Count in the battle against White Whale, and slaying a Sin Archbishop of the Witch Cult, I cannot allow these deeds to go down in anonymity.

Your name, the name of <Knight> Natsuki Subaru shall be held with honor and spoken with admiration throughout the Kingdom. ——When that is so, no one will be able to laugh at the words you have spoken in that Hall]

Hoping to be of assistance to Emilia, they had been the barkings of an empty-handed youth.

The youth who had been dreaming, and who had so many times been broken by the face of reality, having despaired, been sunk into madness, driven by vengeance into despising all things, and at last saved by love —— now, he was here.

Everything that happened in that time, surely, the “Honor” that had passed through Roswaal’s lips... would be proof, that there had been some value in all of that.

——That, no longer remaining in the minds of anyone except Subaru, was the fact that they were Rem’s deeds.

[Subaru:Thank you, I will accept. If it means it would bring some meaning to that battle we fought]

[Roswaal: It is an achievement to be proud of, and I will not allow anyone to make light of it. You now have the right to stand by Emilia-sama’s side with your head held high. By your own strength, you have earned this]

[Subaru:It wasn’t, just my own strength]

Listening to Roswaal’s words, he murmured this under his breath. Watching Roswaal lightly furrowing his brows as if not understanding its meaning, Subaru closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then, as he opened them again, he casually shrugged and,

[Subaru: That was a serious exchange, oy. Gotta be careful, after being out-of-character for so long it’ll be embarrassing to go back to normal again. My face is already heating up!]

[Roswaal:Yo~u're quite right. Eeya~eya, that was not like me at all, even my shoulder's gotten sti~ff. With the relationship between you and me, it really isn't like us to be talking so se~riously]

As if mirroring Subaru as he broke off his serious face, Roswaal's expression relaxed as well, and the tense atmosphere of a moment ago had all but disappeared. And, watching over the conversation between Subaru and her master, Ram let out a small sigh, and with [Well], she continued the conversation,

[Ram: Then, Barusu, you have something you want to ask Roswaal-sama, don't you? That's why you placed Emilia-sama far away from our conversation, after all]

[Subaru: Your shrewdness earlier really helped getting this conversation going, much appreciated..... It's not that I'm treating Emilia-tan as a nuisance, but it seems Ros-chi's mouth will get stiff if she's here]

Ram's pointed observation made Subaru take on an awkward smile. Seeing this smile, Ram directed her gaze toward the place where Emilia had been standing, making sure once more that there was only an unpopulated empty space left over by her absence.

[Ram: I got Lewes-sama to accompany her on a tour of the Sanctuary..... But when Emilia-sama heard that Barusu will be remaining here, she seemed to have been feeling a little lonely]

[Subaru: Even though I'm glad I'm being relied on, if I think about all the things to come, I can't be rushing to every immediate desire in front of me. Most likely, she'll meet up with Otto on the way. Though I am a bit worried about having him alone with her..... that bastard Otto will probably make a move on her... aaaah what do I do? Emilia-tan is super mega adorable oh no I'm getting worried]

[Roswaal: Talking to yourself and making yourself even more worried is ba~d idea, don't you think? Anyway, you were no~t mistaken. ——The truth is, if there are things that I don't want Emilia-sama to hear, I would probably ne~ver open my mouth]

Seeing Subaru's heart fluttering about insubstantial worries, Roswaal shook his head, and laid bare his shameless secretiveness. And as Roswaal did so, Subaru closed one of his eyes, and with a [Just as I thought] put his inner thoughts to his tongue,

[Subaru: You're intentionally restricting information to Emilia-tan.....Just who do you think you're trying to imitate here?] (*Puck :3*)

[Roswaal: It's necessary to be selective with the information, do~n't you think? As a Royal Selection Candidate, Emilia-sama's importance is fa~r above mine. But, right now, her body and her knowledge have not caught up to accompany her qualification and status, and are still in need of polishing. So, while she is still learning, putting too many burdens on her would be unre~asonable.....]

[Subaru: Saying this like you're a guy who only meant to provide a carefree learning environment for Emilia-tan, that's a pretty way to frame it. But to leave her in the dark in a fatal situation, knowing full well but failing to tell her, that doesn't sound reasonable at all, now does it. Even for you, that can't be a good thing]

Knowing that Roswaal was trying to gloss it over with superficial words, Subaru held back his urge to argue, and continued his pursuit in a quiet voice. Seeing Subaru's calm disguise, Roswaal closed a single eye, and silently gazed back at him in return.

Intently, his single eye——the left, yellow pupil continued to stare into Subaru. Unaware of the meaning of that unsettling gaze, Subaru's body wavered. And then, as if having read into his discomfort, Roswaal laughed,

[Roswaal: We~ll, I imagined you would be pursu~ing this to the end sooner or later? That's why, this time I have prepared my reso~lve]

[Subaru: Resolve?]

[Roswaal: The resolve that I will no longer dodge Subaru-kun's questions, and will now give answers. Even if I want to run, I am burdened by this wound, now is just the perfect time, don't you think?]

With a dry, rattling laugh, on the bed, Roswall lightly tapped himself on the thigh as he pronounced this.

For just a moment, Subaru was taken aback by how meekly he had accepted defeat.

[Subaru:Just what, kind of wind is blowing here]

[Roswaal: That you don't trust me up to now makes me feel a bit lonely. But then again, considering the relationship between you and I, I can't blame you for feeling this way]

[Subaru: Not that I think it's good to be so blatant with my wariness, but with everything that's happened up to now, it's only to be expected. You've always been a little on the excessively secretive side, after all..... But this time, I can trust you?]

[Roswaal: Of course]

Seeing Subaru's suspicious gaze, Roswaal nodded and lightly opened his arms.

[Roswaal: Everything that you have accomplished over these past few days have given me more than enough proof to open my heart to you. I can be at ease now. From now on, I can place my trust in you, and into the depths of my heart accept you and recognize you——as my accomplice]

[Subaru: Hold on. Why, do I get the feeling I've just been given a few heavy crosses to bear? It's alright if you don't rip everything open like that, just letting me touch it a little is enough]

[Roswaal: Ayaaya, even when it's bursting out of me you're still so cold]

[Subaru: It's not that, but if you suddenly pull it all out like that, it's just a bit too heavy.....]

As their exchange was starting to sound like a couple who had just began dating disagreeing about where to take their relationship, Subaru coughed and tried to sort out his thoughts, and began with [Anyhow],

[Subaru: Let's leave the accomplice part for another conversation, for now, just let me ask some questions I've been wanting to ask you. ——So, what's the real reason you're hiding all this information from Emilia. First, let's start from there]

[Roswaal: ———]

Once again, Roswaal closed one of his eyes and glared at Subaru.

How Roswaal chooses which information is shared with Emilia——the implications that can follow from this, including all the events of the previous loops, would be unfathomable.

The fact that she was a Half-Elf by birth—— if she had known that this information would incite the Witch Cult into action, then perhaps they might have been able to prepare effective countermeasures against the attack on Arlam village and the Roswaal estate.

And on the other side, it would have had an impact on Subaru's actions as he frantically dashed to and fro to salvage the situation, then, as a result, maybe what happened to Rem would have——

[Subaru: Answer me, Roswaal. If you want to make Emilia-tan the King, then surely, it would be just as inconvenient for you if she dropped out on the way. Yet even so, why are you going to such lengths to put Emilia-tan at a disadvantage by concealing information from her? It doesn't make any sense]

[Roswaal: To that question, I will answer it as such ——Everything is as you pointed out, and it is because it is exactly as you pointed out, that the information I share with Emilia-sama is restricted]

[Subaru:!? What's that supposed to mean. Are you trying to say that concealing information and placing Emilia at a disadvantage, is somehow necessary for her winning the Royal Selection?]

[Roswaal: Indeed it is so. You don't think there is any me~rit in that?]

Roswaal's reply throwing his thoughts into disarray, Subaru furrowed his brows and laid bare his confusion. Seeing this response from Subaru, Roswaal shifted himself on the bed, causing it to creak.

[Roswaal: Subaru-kun, could thi~s be what you wa~nted to say? That when they learn of Emilia-sama's participation in the Royal Selection, there would be a possibility that the Witch Cult would make a move. And in reality, the Witch Cult did move, and attacked my lands. Furthermore, if I had known of this possibility, then I should have been able to prepare some appropriate countermeasures]

[Subaru: Y-yeah. Exactly like that. Anyone would think that, it should be obvious. I might not have known, but the relationship between the Witch Cult and Half-Elves is common knowledge, isn't it? In fact, you must have known. If that's the case, then why didn't you prepare anything.....no, even before that, why did you leave estate and seclude yourself at the Sanctuary?]

[Roswaal: I've been confined here in the Sanctuary, it wasn't as if I meant to be away from estate for so many days.....]

[Subaru: Your excuses won't work anymore. How you got injured and placed into a state of house arrest was when you challenged the Tomb in order to appease the villagers from Arlam. In other words, it was a consequence of me evacuating the villagers from the Witch Cult.....so before that, not returning was by your own intention]

[Roswaal: Using logic to argue against an opponent you're angry at does pay off. It re~ally is, a good habit to get into]

Hearing Subaru's rejection of his simple excuse, Roswaal casually shrugged as if he had never expected it to fool him. Displeased with this expression, Subaru took a step forward, but,

[Subaru:Ram]

[Ram: Roswaal-sama is burdened with wounds. But even so, to incinerate Subaru, a single fingertip would be sufficient.....But Ram, will not forgive such insolent behaviour in front of her]

[Subaru: You seemed to have accepted it. Being treated like a sacrificial piece, it was the same for you as well. He knew those idiots were coming to the village, and yet he fled all alone from that powderkeg waiting to blow. How do you forgive something like that]

[Ram: It's not a matter of forgiving or not forgiving. Ram will pardon any and all action taken by Roswaal-sama. However he treats Ram, whether it's cutting me down or casting me aside, it is all the same]

[Subaru: You——!!]

In front of Ram's incomprehensible devotion, Subaru's throat filled up with rage

But even so, he could not suddenly resort to violence. Perhaps it was because of the sober judgement that he would not be a match against either of the two in front of him, or perhaps, it was because——

[Subaru:Even Rem, was sacrificed because of those kind of reasons I can't understand]

[Ram: ——? I don't know who you are referring to, but Ram has no relation to anyone by this name. To Ram, Roswaal-sama is everything, and everything else is insignificant]

Even Subaru's wrenched-out appeal could not bring about the slightest fragment of an echo in Ram's heart.

He had already known that. That for the girl who had forgotten Rem's existence, that plea would have been meaningless. Yet, at the same time, he also understood.

From the start, he had been aware of Ram's unusual loyalty to Roswaal.

But this perverse obstinance now, was a different kind of madness than the one carried by the Ram that Subaru had known up to now.

And there was no greater reason for this, than her having forgotten Rem's existence.

Subaru didn't know the details of what had happened in their past. But piecing together the fragments from what Rem had told him, he could get a sense of the mutual reliance the sisters had for each other.

With her sense of guilt, and her inferiority complex——swaying in between the two, Rem's complexes had made her become even more deeply dependent on her older sister. And while Ram's instability was not plain to see, when she is around her younger sister, fragments of it would show through.

Just like Rem, whose world mostly consisted of Ram, Ram's world consisted only of Rem and Roswaal. Her complexes having been brought to a resolution, when that narrow world, beginning with Subaru, took in many, various things, Rem changed. But Ram's world had remained narrow.

Having forgotten the person who had made up half of her world, now, Ram's world is comprised only of Roswaal.

It may be extreme, but that was the cause of her excessive loyalty to Roswaal.

[Roswaal: Ram do~n't excite Subaru too much. A~fter all, Subaru didn't intend to do anything outrageous aga~inst me. It was o~nly, a step forward]

[Ram: If you say so, Roswaal-sama]

[Roswaal: Yes yes. It's no~ matter. Isn't that right, Subaru-kun. You look a little angry, but you are not taken over by ra~ge. Something like losing yourself and pu~nching me, you would not choose to lose this opportunity to continue our conversation without interruptions, wo~uld you]

[Subaru: Just what, is that supposed to mean.....]

[Roswaal: It's si~mple. If this was the old you, somewhere along this conversation you would have thrown a fit, shouted, and the conversation would have ended. But you didn't, and even while you pressed down your anger you hung on to the argument, without letting go..... You have grown up, I me~an to say]

As Roswaal was lightly clapping, delivering this superficial compliment, Subaru felt a burning rage in his chest that made him want to cry out. But, knowing if he gave in to that, it would be giving his opponent exactly what he wanted, he stopped himself, and taking a long, deep breath, he held back the waves of his rage.

——And in doing so, he realized that he had proved Roswaal's previous words correct, and he couldn't hold back his irritation with with himself.

[Roswaal: We~ll now, teasing the young man any more than this would not be adult-like. Since you've shown me how you have gro~wn up, I should show a bit more matu~rity on my end as well]

[Subaru:Then please do so. Anyways, please clearly answer my previous question. Answer without trying dodge it. Why, have you hidden the Witch Cult from Emilia. And why, when you knew that the Witch Cult was coming, did you, the greatest combat force we have, leave the estate!]

[Roswaal: I can answer both questions with a single answer. ——I behaved as such in order to avoid a confrontation with the Witch Cult]

[Subaru: Huh——?]

Hearing this calm and orderly reply, for a moment, Subaru couldn't understand.

Chewing them down, swallowing, digesting those words within his mind, and soaking in their contents,

[Subaru: I don't, understand. In order to avoid fighting the Witch Cult.....but why? Don't tell me you're allergic to them, or any crap like that!? If you..... if you were there, couldn't you have taken those bastards out in one shot? Then the victims.....]

[Roswaal: I see. It's true, if I was there, then the casualties from this disturbance would have lessened. I try to have an accurate understanding of my own strength, and I am aware that I am among one of the few most powerful people in this country. It's safe to say, that if I was there, then the Witch Cult attack this time would have been easily repelled]

[Subaru: If you understand that, then why——!]

[Roswaal: That is, why]

Watching drops saliva flying from Subaru, Roswaal held out a finger to stop him, and then, pointing that same finger toward the ceiling,

[Roswaal: If I had done everything, it would not have Emilia-sama's achievement, nor would it have been your achievement, now would it? Even if my own reputation was improved, it would have been of no~ use]

[Subaru: ————h]

What he was saying, Subaru could not understand it at all.

It must have been a joke. Praying, that Roswaal would follow that with some kind of jest, Subaru held his tongue and waited for Roswaal's next words.

However, looking at Subaru, who had grown silent, Roswaal only tilted his head,

[Roswaal: How could I deny it? After all, it was a disaster that I can be completely certain was going to happen. How could I possibly not use that to the fullest?]

[Subaru: Y-you.....do you even know, what you're saying.....?]

[Roswaal: ——? I don't understand which part Subaru-kun finds to be a problem. What could it be, I wonder. Was it the damage done to Arlam village, was it having had to borrow the strength of the mercenaries and Crusch-sama's private army to repulse the Witch Cult.....or was it about the fact that all these damages could have been avoided?]

Subaru's voice was trembling, and, as if reading into the inner depths of his heart, Roswaal threw out those words as though it was all a matter of course.

Hearing this reply, Subaru felt a tremor trembling through every organ of his body.

Before, when he had spoken with Puck, when the spirit said in front of the sleeping Rem that "This child sacrificed herself to help Lia", Subaru had flown into a rage.

And because that happened, Subaru painfully realized that in between his and the Great Spirit's sensibilities, there was an insurmountable gap that could not be filled in with words. In other words, the rage he felt at that moment made him understand that they had always been two fundamentally different entities.

However, that was not the case for Roswaal. He understood the reason why Subaru was mad, and he knew what Subaru wanted to say——and it was while knowing all of that, that he made this cruel decision.

[Subaru: That was all hindsight, wasn't it. In a way, I understand what you're trying to say. In repulsing the Witch Cult's attack, whoever was in command would receive the credit, and that would have no small an impact on the Royal Selection, I can understand that.....and I also understand that if you took care of it yourself it would not have the same effect. But!]

Revealing his teeth, Subaru, with a wild swing of his arm,

[Subaru: How many people do you think died because you weren't there and didn't bother to say anything!? Sure, the casualties weren't catastrophic. But still, the number wasn't zero. People died. Whether it was our own people, or those bastards from the Witch Cult.....]

[Roswaal: Even if I was there, the treatment of the Witch Cultists would not have changed. All of them, would just have been reduced to ash. I'll accept responsibility for the casualties on our side, but to blame me for the enemy's losses would be a bit of a stretch don't you think]

[Subaru: ——B-, still, couldn't there have been a more peaceful..... No, it's not about that! Every single thing you've been saying had been in hindsight! It's true it went well. Our losses were minimal, the enemies were wiped out. Emilia-tan is safe, the villagers of Arlam were all safely evacuated.....But that was, all just coincidence. Originally th——]

Originally, if Subaru didn't do anything, the villagers, everyone in the mansion, Emilia...

[Subaru: They should have been dead. This time, if everything didn't work out perfectly.....everyone would have been wretchedly, cruelly, agonizingly..... tortured to death]

Covering his face, Subaru strangled back the tears within his voice.

On the other side of his closed eyelids, once again those scenes of hell that he could never forget emerged.

The village consumed by flames. The cadavers strewn about the ground. The corpses of the children. And Rem's dead body abandoned on the mansion's garden. And, at last, the frozen, ending of the World.

——All of that, would have been the indisputable World if Subaru could not overturn it by Returning by Death.

[Subaru: If you were there, none of those things would have happened.....You knew, but still watched them die. How many times, have you killed those people.....]

[Roswaal: It's troubling to be so misunderstood. The ones who attacked were the Witch Cult, not me. Besides, the Witch Cult's attack was stopped by your hands before anything could happen, the victims you spoke of never existed. ——You are only repeating nonsense]

[Subaru: ——Is that so]

Listening to Roswaal's cold words, Subaru dropped his shoulders and replied in a quiet voice.

Nonsense ——if that's what he considered them to be, then there was nothing Subaru can say to change that. Return by Death could not be explained to him, nor could Roswaal be blamed for things that never happened in this reality.

The only one who had experienced that hell was Subaru, and the one who exonerated Roswaal of the crime of bringing about that hell, was also Subaru.

[Subaru:If I turned out to be still just a useless piece of trash, then what would you have done? To make Emilia King, you want that as much as I do. But the odds were just too one-sided, it's not even enough to gamble on..... it was far more likely that everything would have ended there]

[Roswaal: However, you overturned such a possibility. ——Are you unsatisfied?]

[Subaru: I am unsatisfied. You don't seem to be the kind of guy who would leave things to something so uncertain]

There are several kinds of people who gamble. There are those who don't know whether they will win or lose, and rely entirely on their luck. And there are those who do not wish to

be directed by fate, and only when they have assembled the best possible hand, do they at the very last moment leave it to chance.

And then, there are those who pre-arrange everything from beginning to end, and would only run the fixed gambling match where victory was already certain.

[Subaru: You are not the kind who would gamble in the first place. So, why did you do it?]

[Roswaal: —Because, I believe in you]

When Subaru asked a second time, Roswaal's voice dropped in pitch as he replied.

Hearing this answer, Subaru couldn't stop a snicker from leaking from his lips.

[Subaru: So you don't feel like giving me a serious answer after all]

[Roswaal: Whether you believe my story or not is another matter, but everything I've said is true? Because here, tonight, I've decided that I will not lie to you. The things that I cannot say, I will not say, and if there are things inappropriate for this occasion, I will not mention them. But, what I do say, I swear that they are free of falsehoods]

In response to Subaru's words that were tinged with a color of disappointment, Roswaal said this in a solemn voice. But, was this something that could be believed? Having already lost all positive impressions of Roswaal in the conversation up to now, Subaru was no longer in a position to accept everything at face value.

In front of Subaru's sharpening glare, Roswaal rolled his head,

[Roswaal: I will say it again. —The reason I made this decision, is because I believed in you. I believed, that if you realized the danger Emilia-sama was in, you will strive to establish an alliance with Crusch-sama, and do everything in your power to repel the Witch Cult, and distinguish yourself in doing so]

[Subaru: Even if we pretend for a moment that's true, just how the hell did you decide to believe in someone like me! What do you know about me! We've only known each other for a month, what me looked like I was the kind of man that you can place that kind of faith in?]

Stomping on the floor, Subaru objected to Roswaal's shameless and flowery words. Pointing out a finger, Subaru shook his head, rejecting what he had just said,

[Subaru: But it couldn't be. When I last left you, I was absolutely, one-hundred-percent trash. It was only because of what happened afterwards, that the trash got more or less better. But what happened afterwards, no one else knows except me. ——So just what part of me did you believe in!?!]

Roswaal closed a single eye, and disturbingly, with the one yellow pupil, stared into Subaru.

As if to shake off that stare, Subaru kicked the floor with all his might.

[Subaru: It's absurd! Are you really trying to say that you trusted that empty-headed idiot to get everything to work out, and just left your people and everything else behind like it's some kind of a game, risking your own position and future as the wager? What am I even supposed to say to something that callous!?!]

[Roswaal:It seems, this is the end of today's conversation]

Whereas Subaru had laid his anger bare, Roswaal only whispered in a lonely voice.

Upon hearing that whisper, Subaru screamed, lending voice to his inexhaustible vexation.

[Subaru: If you don't intend speak straightforwardly, it'll be pointless whatever you say. After this conversation, I don't intend to believe anything you say anymore]

[Roswaal: It seems your impression of me has taken a dive, that is tru~ly regrettable.
.....Even though I don't think there is a need to confirm it, but regarding our conversation tonight, Emilia-sama...]

[Subaru: I won't tell her. There isn't much information to begin with, plus it's all been embellished, there wouldn't be any point in telling her. You've anticipated this as well, haven't you. That's why you've been going round and round]

Regardless of Roswaal's true intentions, the Royal Selection was still ongoing, and creating any more friction between Emilia and Roswaal was not something he wanted to do. Besides, with Emilia now acting as a representative of the villagers of Arlam, Roswaal's faction needs to remain united.

It gave him spasms to think how he was going along with Roswaal's intentions, but, challenging the Trials would improve how people saw Emilia. ——And all of that, was controlled within the palms of that man's hands.

[Roswaal: You understand everything, and the anger you harbour towards me is unbearable..... yet you didn't flip over the table or anything like that. You re~ally are, just as I expected]

As Roswaal said this to Subaru, who had been grinding his teeth to hold back his vexation, Subaru lifted his head, and saw Roswaal's face twisting into a truly revolting expression.

[Roswaal: You are, without a doubt, worthy of being my accomplice——no?]

[Subaru:You bastard, I hope you die a worthy death]

[Roswaal: I know. Without a doubt, I will be falling into hell. That is why, before that happens, I must extend my utmost brutality over the present world, to the best of my ability]

Sending a sharp glare at Roswaal's declaration, without a word, Subaru turned around and stormed out of the room.

Any further conversation would have been pointless. If Roswaal had no plans of revealing his true intentions, if there was nothing Subaru could do to break into his thoughts, then nothing could have come of that exchange.

But,

[Subaru: ——You think everything will happen as you expect them to, and everyone will dance to your tune]

Clenching his fist tightly, walking down the street in the night, Subaru prepared his new resolve.

Tomorrow, Roswaal would have Emilia challenge the Trials, to overturn the understanding of the people of the Sanctuary and Arlam village, and their contempt for Half-Elves.

What may arise in that process, how many burdens Emilia will have to endure, were not within that man's considerations. In the end, no matter how many wounds Emilia will bear, even if her heart was worn to its core, he would only frivolously laugh at the events unfolding in accordance to his will. If that were the case,

[Subaru: I won't let it happen. That girl..... Emilia, I will protect her]

The Qualification to challenge the Trials—— if the dream he saw in the Tomb was not only a dream, then Subaru would also have been granted that Qualification.

It may have been granted on the whim of a Witch, but with it, he could thwart Roswaal's plans. All of the pain and tears that have come into existence only because that man cared nothing about those around him, Subaru will put a stop to them here.

[Subaru: ——That, is what I must accomplish in this Sanctuary]

Upwards, across from where he threw up his fist, was the floating, pale-blue moon.

As if to hold onto that far and unreachable light, he closed tight his fist, and, sketching out the form of that cute silver-haired girl within his thoughts, he determined, he will crash head-on into that clown's devious plans.

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[Ram: ——Was that, really alright?]

In the room that Subaru had stormed out of, Ram, who had been watching over their conversation, asked this quietly. Hearing this, her master shook his head as if devoid of strength.

[Roswaal: Such a reaction was o~nly to be expected. But even if it was expected, it is a depressing thing, to be gouging at a young man's heart]

[Ram: You do know there is no need to lie in front of Ram?]

[Roswaal: I'm glad you're wo~rried about me, but those were my honest thoughts. Why, in Ram's heart do I really seem like someone who enjoys doing these things?]

Answering by wordlessly averting her eyes from her master, Ram rearranged the bed sheets that had been ruffled in the earlier argument. As she did this, her fingers felt a hardness across her master's stomach, and she pulled it out of the sheets. (*Damnit Tappei!! >_<*)

[Ram: Roswaal-sama. This is...]

[Roswaal: Aah, so~rry. If Subaru-kun had seen this, thi~ngs would have gotten quite co~mplicated. But, it would have been too much punishment if I had put this under my butt. If I'm not careful...]

Receiving what she passed back as if it was very precious, Roswaal gently caressed its surface as he took it. Then, he said [No matter what], touching a finger to his chin,

[Roswaal: Emilia-sama's qualification is now confirmed, and Subaru-kun has been fired up. Tomorrow night, the Trials will begin.....Ram, what do you think will ha~ppen?]

[Ram: Roswaal-sama's considerations are beyond Ram's ability to guess.Roswaal-sama, you know what is going to happen, then?]

[Roswaal: This thing isn't that conve~nient. Compared to the incomplete ones held by the Witch Cult, it is somewhat superior, but it is nothing more than a poor imitation, and still far from what she desired. The argument with Subaru-kun just now, how much of that do you think happened as described]

Roswaal took a deep breath as if contemplating, and seeing this, Ram slightly raised her brows and then timidly, with hesitation,

[Ram: Then, how much of what you said to Barusu was.....]

[Roswaal: Even though there was some acting.....most of it was according to my true fe~elings. No no, but of course I knew Subaru-kun would be angry. But while I knew it, I could also add some things that I wa~nted to say as well, isn't that so]

Roswaal waved his hands to Ram as if to explain himself, and then, with [Anyhow], he continued,

[Roswaal: To be despised by the partner of my heart, it does feel painful to be thought of this way, as if I had only been thinking of myself. Oh how childish I still am, my spi~teful friend]

Roswaal laughed as he spoke.

Wrapped within his arms, precious, precious, was a book with black binding.

Roswaal placed his fingertips over the binding of the book, and slowly, and slowly, he continued to trace over it.

Lovingly, and lovingly, slowly, and slowly——

Chapter 15 [Qualifications And Trials]

——On the morning of the next day, trodding on grass still adorned by the morning's dew, Subaru was looking up toward the entrance of the ruins he had visited the day before.

Yesterday, having been restricted by time, he didn't get a chance to take a good look at the exteriors. But looking at it now, it all actually seemed to have been surprisingly well maintained.

Although the callously sprawling ivy had spread to cover the entire exterior of the entrance, the plants surrounding the Tomb have been neatly attended to, and he could discern on the Tomb itself signs of restorations of broken walls that had deteriorated over the ages.

[Subaru: Not really sure what kind of relationship those guys here have with the Tomb]

Touching his hand to the walls that were showing strange colors under the light of the Sun, Subaru mumbled this under his breath.

He thought back to the conversation with Garfiel and Lewes in the previous night inside the room in which Roswaal was confined. They all wanted Emilia to take the Trials, and hoped, as a result, she would be able to liberate them from their imprisonment within the Sanctuary.

[Subaru: Judging from what they said, for Garfiel and the others, the Witch is just something of a nuisance, isn't it? So why are they maintaining the Tomb like it's so important to them.....]

[Otto: Maybe it's the opposite. The Tomb is the reason that the people here are all bound to this land, right? So until someone passes the Trials, they mustn't allow the Tomb to get damaged. Since if demolishing the Tomb would set them free, Garfiel would have already done it a long time ago, wouldn't he?]

The one who followed up on Subaru's deductions was Otto, who was wandering behind him, looking all around the Tomb.

Early in the morning, Otto, who had been sleeping inside the dragon carriage just as he declared he would, got woken up and was bullied by Subaru into coming along to the Tomb on a scouting mission. Naturally, Otto grumbled about it at first, but...

[Otto: Then again, it's rare to get a chance to visit something like the Tomb of the Witch of Greed..... maybe coming along would be worth it after all. There's no knowing whether we'll find some treasure belonging to the Witch of Greed along the way. We could make a fortune!]

[Subaru: If you go around announcing that you're selling some Witch-related stuff, won't the over-obsessive guys from the Witch Cult come hunt you down? Sorry I woke you up, that was my bad, gees, but don't go broadcasting it and bring a sea of flames here]

Saying this, trying to save the merchant-souled Otto from himself, Subaru turned back to the Tomb once again. Silence fell all around, and the only sounds remaining, filtering through the trees, were the chirping of insects, and the rustling of leaves caressed by the wind.

A crisp air was flowing through the Sanctuary in the dawn, it was perfect for a morning stroll.

[Otto: Say, we didn't come out here just to breathe the air and go right back, right? If you wanted to enjoy a stroll in the morning, you'd probably have brought Emilia-sama instead of me]

[Subaru: Surprisingly, Emilia-tan's no-good in the mornings. Even though Emilia-tan being groggy after just waking up is dangerously adorable..... it'll have to wait until everything's settled down. She's probably still stressed out after the conversations yesterday, I'll let her sleep for a little longer]

[Otto: So, you've got the men together for your skullduggery while the Princess is asleep. You, sir, are a wicked one]

Sensing Otto gleefully squinting his eyes at him, Subaru only shrugged. But still, Otto's reading was dead-on. The truth is, it was in order to do something he wouldn't want Emilia to see, that Subaru came to the Tomb.

[Otto: Then, what are we doing? I'm not too confident with my magic abilities, but if it's using Wind and Water magic to stifle the sound of footsteps or to suddenly hide myself in a flash..... ah, and I can also transfer my footsteps to a completely different location]

[Subaru: Your magic, sounds like it's incredibly useful for cat burglars, doesn't it?]

[Otto: Well, people usually take it the wrong way. But I wouldn't use it for stealing. I have no qualms about using it to listen-in on conversations, though]

Seeing Otto bragging this with eyes narrowed and his white teeth all showing, Subaru sighed.

Then, lifting up a finger in front of the high-spirited Otto, Subaru pointed it toward the Tomb.

[Subaru: I want to take a look inside the Tomb for a bit. If my predictions are correct, the lights inside the Tomb will send me blessings for my future endeavors. If I'm wrong, then I'll probably keel over and won't get up, in that case, if you'll be so good as to pull me out...]

[Otto: What kind of person would just say "Alright, I got it" after listening to that explanation!? Keeling over and won't get up, what's that supposed to mean, please stop right there, I'm getting scared now!]

In reaction to Subaru's super-important announcement, Otto started wailing. But hearing Otto's complaint, Subaru looked over as if watching an unreasonable child, and,

[Subaru: Listen up, this is the Tomb of the Witch of Greed. Simply put, if you set one foot inside the place without the Witch's permission your consciousness will be snatched right out with its roots. I got done-in like that yesterday. So this place is dangerous, don't you be going in there]

[Otto: If it didn't work out yesterday, Natsuki-san shouldn't be going in either, right? If you know you're going to keel over why do you still want to go in, it'll only make a mess of things, let's not do that. Besides, if it really ends up that way how will I get Natsuki-san out?]

[Subaru: Always questions, questions, coming out one after another..... If you keep believing there will be an answer to everything, you'll be getting into a spoiled mentality, you know]

[Otto: Please stop trying to gloss things over with sophistries just because it's too bothersome to explain!]

Having been completely seen through, Subaru smacked his tongue and scowled. Seeing how in the short time they've known each other Otto has already grasped all the tricks in dealing with him, Subaru shook his head dejectedly,

[Subaru: Here, I borrowed some rope from the dragon carriage. I'll tie this around my waist, so if I collapse inside, you can gently, calmly, lovingly pull me out]

[Otto: No matter how gently, calmly, lovingly I pull you, you'll still be getting mud and cuts all over I think]

[Subaru: Well I can't be picky considering the circumstances. Just think of it as repaying a favor]

[Otto: You're the one who owes me a favor, right!?!]

While Otto was raising his objection and putting on his grumbling-face, Subaru had already tied the rope around his own waist and handed him the other end. Unwillingly accepting it, Otto carefully inspected the loop around Subaru's waist, and yanked on it just to be sure it was safe.

However much he might be complaining, he was still a conscientious person.

[Subaru: Despite being a merchant, you seem really easy to fool..... is it really alright for a guy like you to be doing business?]

[Otto: You know, you seem to have completely forgotten how I'm literally holding your life in my hands right now]

As Subaru looked at him with a motherly gaze, Otto squinted his eyes, tugged on the rope and grumbled.

With a wry smile, Subaru gave him a slight bow on the spot, and in the same breath he turned round about, toward the entrance of the Tomb.

A foul, earthy air was quietly flowing from the Tomb. The morning light of the sun, like the twilight of yesterday's, lit only several meters into the entrance before vanishing entirely. The other end of the tunnel was shrouded in absolute dark, and nothing seemed to have changed from the path that had collapsed the moment he set his foot inside.

[Subaru: Well, it wouldn't actually collapse anyway, I'd just go splat on the first step, so that'd actually make it easier to pull me out, I guess]

[Otto: Natsuki-san, you can go in whenever you're ready, just give me a signal when you're going in]

[Subaru: Alright, I'm going in!]

Subaru had no hesitations in making that decision.

In the worst case, he'd faint and get called by the Witch to another tea party. Although he

wasn't especially looking forward to getting his arm ripped off, punched into healing, and drinking body fluids again——

[Subaru: But compared to all the brink-of-life-and-death stuff so far, it's not all that baaaa——d!]

Declaring this, Subaru nimbly jumped-off into the entrance of the Tomb.

The threshold——or whatever that might be called, crossing over that boundary between the sunlight and the shadow of the Tomb, Subaru gingerly opened his eyes.

Whereas yesterday, his first step had been met instantly by the torment of that weightless sensation——

[Subaru: The ground is solid. I didn't fall in]

It's an improvement from yesterday, and while it was subtle, it was nonetheless a reassuring change. Taking a deep breath, he took another step. And with his second step into the Tomb, Subaru's body was completely swallowed by the shadows of the ruins. To Otto, waiting outside, Subaru's figure must have become obscured or perhaps even lost to sight altogether.

[Otto: Natsuki-san, are you alright? If you're going to faint, please give me a signal like "I'm gonna faint!" while you're fainting]

[Subaru: That's a bit difficult isn't it... And I wouldn't want to admit it if I'm going to faint, I'd probably shout something like "I don't wanna faint!"]

[Otto: What's with the unnecessary pride in a situation like this!]

Along with their usual exchange, they took some small comfort in confirming each other's positions through their voices. And, reassured by that sense of relief, Subaru took a third step, and then a fourth.

[Otto: ——Oh]

[Subaru: Ah.....]

The next moment, the scene spread out at once in front of Subaru's eyes.

Rather, in an instant, the shadow was banished from the ruins, and its interiors bared itself for the intruder's eyes to see.

Upon the walls on both sides of the corridor, at about the height of Subaru's shoulders, lined up in equal and even intervals, the lamps lit up, and with faint, swerving luminescence, lighted the path.

It was a corridor constructed of the same material as the exterior walls, about the width of Subaru's outstretched arms, or two people walking side by side. The height was such that he might bump his head if he jumped. Or, if that giant balding old man was here, there would probably be sparks flying from his scalp scraping against the ceiling as he walked if he doesn't bend down.

[Otto:There's light coming from inside. Is that some kind of condition being met?]

[Subaru: This is a welcoming for someone who's qualified to take the Trials of the night, or so they say..... I thought in the worst case I might've been just spacing out and daydreaming all of this]

Once again trying to make sure that what he saw was real, Subaru held up his palms and stared at them. Then, touching himself on the forehead, Subaru recalled the sensation of the touch he had received from her fingertip within the dream.

[Subaru: Looks like I've received your souvenir from the tea party all well and good. Even though you pretty much charged me a price for it without my permission... I wasn't planning on telling anyone for the time being anyway]

[Otto: Hey I can see inside as well, so then what'll happen if I come in with you? Can we pillage the Witch of Greed's Tomb now?]

[Subaru: All I know is that there's an evil wizard whose whole body got split open when he tried to go in and he's still recovering from his wounds. What'll happen to you though, I'm too not sure]

[Otto: Isn't that incredibly scary!?!]

Listening to Otto getting frightened behind him, Subaru confirmed once more that he had achieved his objective. Although he should be able to venture deeper inside like this, there was a chance that Otto might want to follow in behind him, so Subaru had to abandon that idea for now.

Either way, all that Subaru wanted to do was to confirm that he was qualified for the Trials, and to verify that the words Echidona said to him within the dream could be believed.

In any case, if he could step into the Tomb, then the knowledge and conditions Echidona had given him, along with the payment she extracted, must all have been real. And the same, then, would go for all those Witches that Subaru had met inside that daydream.

[Subaru: If that's true, then 400 years ago, those "GOING-MY-WAY" Witches would've been going HYA-HA all over the place, wouldn't they. What must that have been like, at the end of that century..... good thing I got transported into this Age, I guess]

Just the thought of an age wrought by chaos by the Witches of Sin and the Witch of Envy, makes the present Age seem pretty reasonable in comparison. Although the atrocities of the Sin Archbishops would offset this somewhat.

Still, what a pain in the ass those Witches must have been, every last one of them.

[Subaru: Anyways, all the preparations on my end are O-K. Now it's just waiting for nightfall, and seeing how Emilia-tan's Trials turn out. Then let's maintain a high degree of flexibility, and be ready to adapt to the situation]

Although it sounded nice, that pretty much meant he had no plans whatsoever. Saying that, Subaru looked back at the Tomb's entrance once more as he left.

Returning to a worried-looking Otto, Subaru untied the rope around his waist and left it next to the entrance.

[Subaru: It might come in handy again, besides, maybe I'll need it tonight, so I'll hide it here for now. And sorry for dragging you along, Otto]

[Otto: No, that's alright, as long as you came back safe..... but more importantly, aren't we going back empty-handed? You went in the Tomb but didn't bring anything back, what did you even go in for?]

[Subaru: I'm having a really hard time figuring out which part of what you just said I should take seriously, but maybe I'll just take that as your artistic style. I'm not religious or anything, but grave robbing is still not something I'd do you know?]

It's not easy to understand why Japan, being an otherwise the irreligious country, manages to revere eight million gods without actually believing in any single one in particular. One could even say it's the homebase of the hodgepodge-approach when it comes to religion. Or, it might be just as accurate to call it a collection of cowards being overly-wary of ghosts just in case they actually exist.

[Otto: Of course all that was just joking around. But if that was all, you didn't really need me here, did you? Why'd you bring me along?]

[Subaru: Actually, it was somewhat of a gamble whether I could go in or not. So whether it was getting confused at seeing me falling on my face, or getting traumatized for life after witnessing my body exploding, it'd be best if the victim of that was you.....]

[Otto: What kind of selection criteria is that!? And I got more than just a little hunch that was by the process of elimination!]

[Subaru: Dummy, you were the first person that came to mind when I thought about who to trouble. Don't make me say it out loud, it's embarrassing]

[Otto: Any human being should be embarrassed to make that kind of decision!]

Hearing Subaru's shamelessly dished-out explanation, Otto's high-pitched retort echoed outwards. Throughout the forest in the morning, reverberating against the ruins, and lingering there, like a regretful conversation with itself. Usually, one would expect the only

audience, besides the people present, to be the insects and the animals hidden within the trees, but——

[???: Already so loud so early in the morning, oy. Makin' a racket right above where a Witch's sleepin, it's like "Yohororoi only crows in th'morning", y'know]

[Subaru: Such a pain in the ass, that Yohororoi. I'll give him a talking-to next time I see him]

Saying this, turning his gaze away from Tomb's entrance, Subaru saw, coming from the forest beside him, the one who had cut into their conversation—— scratching his short, golden hair, baring his white fangs, it was Garfiel.

And roughly rubbing away the sweat on his forehead,

[Garfiel: I'll say this first, runnin' into ya was a coincidence. Every morning I do a run around the outskirts of the Sanctuary so I just found you guys here. Don't gimme that leery look]

[Subaru: It's not that I'm being wary. Besides, we didn't say anything we can't let other people overhear. Right Otto? Totally, nothing that we can't let other people overhear]

To that feint, or whatever Garfiel's words were supposed to be, Subaru shrugged, and proceeded to violently pat Otto on the shoulder. As if utterly confused at being slapped around, Otto let out a [Uuuehh?]

[Otto: E-eehh, yeah that's right, nothing especially troublesome or suspicious or anything like that? Just a little rehearsal for grave-robbing later, just a little rehearsal, that sort of thing!]

[Subaru: Amazing, Otto. I've never seen a man dig his own grave this happily right in front of another grave before]

Seeing the high spirited Otto suddenly looking like he had no idea what he was saying, Subaru quickly cut him off and stole a glance at Garfiel's reaction. But, judging from Garfiel's expression, it seemed like Otto's confession-of-sorts had completely went in one ear and came out the other.

[Garfiel: What is it, comeon, I won't snitch or get angry or anything. Long as you aren't breaking stuff or doing something that's bad for the Sanctuary, I won't have to do anything]

[Subaru: Is that, so. Then I sincerely thank you for that guarantee. It's too bad even if I want to fight it out I don't think I stand any chance of winning]

[Garfiel: Eesh, I already feel sorry for ya before even fightin ya..... kinda wanna say that, but nevermind. It's the same thing whatever opponent I'm lookin at. I am the strongest, after all]

His eyes beaming, Garfiel said this full of self-satisfaction.

In reality, after having seen first-hand what he was capable of, only an idiot would raise an objection here. But, because he knew Reinhardt, whose existence was of an entirely different dimension, he still had the urge to say a word or two about it.

But swallowing back what he had wanted to say, Subaru slightly raised his hand with a [Al~~right then],

[Subaru: It should be about time Emilia-tan woke up now, I want to keep her company for her morning studies so I was just thinking of heading back. You're in the middle of your morning run too, right? So let's just.....]

[Garfiel: You're heading to the Cathedral, huh. Then I'll accompany ya]

As Subaru was hurriedly trying to say goodbyes and go their separate ways, he was cut off by Garfiel's unexpected proposal. Surprised, Subaru was just about to refuse with a [Naaah], when,

[Garfiel: Frankly, you should listen to my advice. Besides, you shouldn't be wanderin around the Sanctuary with just you two guys in the first place. There's no knowin what could happen]

[Subaru: ——? What does that mean. That's an odd way to put it. You made it sound as if it's dangerous here]

[Garfiel: That's why I'm tellin ya, isn't it]

Seeing Subaru looking confused as if not understanding his words, Garfiel clacked his teeth with [What'm I gonna do with ya], and then, drawing near, he continued in a lowered voice,

[Garfiel: Pisses me off to be talking about family troubles, but the residents of the Sanctuary are not all in the same basket]

[Subaru: What's, that supposed to mean?]

[Garfiel: If we follow the village-chief granny's plan, it'd be taking Roswaal and the humans as hostages and forcing Emilia-sama to take the Trials and break the Witch's contract or somethn like that. But in reality, only about half the guys are on board with the old hag's plan.....and then there's also a bunch who aren't]

Coming to this point, Garfiel lowered his tone even further.

[Garfiel: For the guys who want to stay holed up in this Sanctuary, you guys being here is a bit of a nuisance. To prevent Emilia-sama from takin the Trials, who knows what kind of trouble they'll stir up]

[Subaru: Unless you mean..... there's a chance they'll be turning their fangs on Otto and me?]

[Garfiel: There's a chance they'll even use violence on Emilia-sama, I think. Well, it's like "Even the snorting becomes rough in front of th'hole" y'know? But long as I'm with ya, I won't let them do anything to bother ya]

Even though Garfiel said this lightly, Subaru was starting to worry about leaving Emilia behind.

Or rather, he was hating himself for not having thought of this possibility earlier.

There was a rift within their mutual understanding between the residents of the Sanctuary headed by Garfiel, and the villagers of Arlam. In that case, why wouldn't there be internal factions within each of the camps as well?

It's not like every single one of them would have just raised their hands in agreement with the Sanctuary's plans. The situation would never progress as one expects them to.

Subaru himself was all too aware of that fact.

[Subaru: I have to get back right away.....!]

[Garfiel: Aah? I scared ya too much didn't I? There's no need to be panickin, those guys won't fight among themselves in broad daylight, besides isn't Emilia-sama in the Cathedral? Who's gonna do that kind of thing with all those humans runnin around? If they wanna get ya, it'll be picking off someone like this noisy lil'bro here who keeps straying from th'herd]

[Subaru: Mmu..... That, makes sense. If they go against the will of the majority outright they'll only be worsening their own position, won't they, so they won't do anything rashly yet]

His agitation calming down a just little, Subaru breathed a sigh of relief and tried to bring his heart rate under control.

Then, suddenly noticing something, he raised his brows once more.

[Subaru: Unless, you thought it'd be dangerous for me and Otto to come out alone, so you came along with us?]

[Garfiel:Aah?]

Seeing Subaru bending his neck asking this, Garfiel was stumped a moment before he could react. Then, he quickly turned his back so Subaru couldn't see his expression.

[Garfiel: There's no way it's like that. Coincidence. Told ya it was a coincidence!]

[Subaru: See, Otto? That's the proper example of Tsundere. Yesterday on our first meeting we got to see the fiery and magnificent Tsun, and now, isn't the embarrassed and adorable Dere just as captivating?]

[Otto: Enn~~, actually, having personally gotten a taste of the Tsun on my forehead yesterday, it's still a little hard to accept, but surprisingly somehow I get the feeling he isn't a very bad person, I can't deny that it feels as if my manly heart is being deceived]

[Subaru: Uwa, you're really easy to trick you know]

[Otto: I've been set up!!!]

As Otto's ludicrous wail resounded through the forest in the morning, the frightened birds spread their wings and took to the sky.

The noisy Otto on the one hand, and the really hard-to-hate Garfiel on the other. Being together with these two like this, for the first time since coming to this parallel world, Subaru felt like he's acquired some bad companions he could actually be with as equals, in the trues sense of the word.

[Subaru: Well, I'm pretty easy as well]

And, relaxing his cheeks, Subaru ever so slightly smiled.

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Awaiting the coming of night, standing in front of the entrance of the Tomb, Subaru now felt a dark wind upon his skin that was very different from the crisp wind of the morning.

[Emilia: Now that it's night, it really does feel like a Tomb. It's even more ominous than yesterday]

Staring at the tomb's entrance as she said this, her silver hair swaying in the wind, it was Emilia. Playing with the end of her three-stranded braid, she stole a glance at Subaru,

[Emilia: Do you think it's, ok to go in now?]

[Subaru: If they had stuck a sign on the entrance that said "We Open at 7-o'Clock" then it'd be easier to tell, but looks like they didn't do that... If the Trials just start roughly around nightfall, once it's dark all around that should be a good enough range I think]

[Emilia: Yeah. Alright, I'll go in then]

With a light sigh, even as she was saying this, Emilia still seemed unable to make up her mind. At her side, waiting for her to gather up her courage, Subaru turned back his head to look behind him.

There were four other people besides Subaru who came to send Emilia into the Trials. There was Garfiel and Lewes of the Sanctuary-team, there was Roswaal's representative, Ram, and then, there's the not-quite-sure-why-he's-here, Otto. But then, if we add him to Emilia and Subaru of the Emilia faction, they would be considered the largest faction here.

[Subaru: But on the other hand, if we count the whole Sanctuary, then we're easily the smallest faction here. Come to think of it, life could be getting a lot harder from now on]

[Emilia: What are you mumbling about? It's reeeeaally getting to me]

[Subaru: Oh I'm just talking to myself. Emilia-tan you just focus on getting ready for what's ahead. Although, to be honest, since I wasn't able to find out about the contents of the Trials it's getting me really worried.....]

[Emilia: Not knowing the contents, it's the same for anyone who challenged the Trials so far, right? I shouldn't be sneaky and start cheating when it's my turn. Even with the same conditions, I'll try my best]

Seeing Emilia tightening her little fist, pumping herself up, Subaru quickly held up a hand in front of his eyes like he's shielding it from a radiant light. Now, the way he was trying to get a Witch to help him cheat right off the bat was really coming off as sneaky in comparison.

Because, compared to himself, how pure and noble Emilia is.

[Subaru: E • M • K !(Emilia • Major • Knighto)! It's too much!]

[Emilia: Oh, it's been awhile since I heard Subaru say that]

Starting with a small giggle, Emilia's expression broke down as she heard Subaru's old catchphrase. Seeing her smile, Subaru decided that the joke was still worth keeping around after all, and nodded,

[Subaru: Anyway, I don't know what kind of things are in there, but if you sense any kind of danger just cry out. If you call my name, I will fly right over to your side]

[Emilia: If you come in, won't you go PA-TAN right away?]

[Subaru: It's been awhile since I heard someone call it going PA-TAN.....](**Pa-Tan is the sound of falling over*)

Seeing Emilia pouting up her lips, just as Subaru started objecting and scratching his face, [But], Emilia continued,

[Emilia: Thank you for worrying about me. Puck still hasn't shown his face at all, so I am reeeaaally getting worried. And I feel like I'm completely relying on Subaru now]

[Subaru: Then you can rest your ultra-dummy weight against me, you know. Emilia-tan is light as a feather, and if I don't touch you from time to time to make sure you're still there I'll get really worried]

[Emilia: But somehow I get the feeling that wiggly thing you're doing with your fingers is really gross]

Seeing Subaru endlessly wiggling his fingers, Emilia smiled wryly. And, with her nervousness unraveling, she did a little stretch that made herself seem a little taller.

[Emilia: Somehow, I feel like my shoulders have gotten a little lighter. Ever since the first time we met, that was what Subaru had been aiming for, wasn't it?]

[Subaru: If I had that kind of first-rate THERAPEUTIC abilities, I wouldn't be the kind of lonely boy who spends his time learning origami to such mastery as to be able to make "Rindougurumas"]

He took a certain pride in having reached the extremes of that art that flows out of ones fingertips. Although, there was really no one he could show it to other than his parents.

Listening to Subaru's drab remarks about his past, Emilia adorably tilted her head a little to show her non-understanding. But seeing her alright now, and so completely cute, Subaru crossed his arms and nodded.

And with that expression of not-understanding still on her face, Emilia turned toward the Tomb.

[Emilia: ——This time, I'm really going. So pray for my safe return]

[Subaru: I'll be praying until the Buddha's ears bleed]

Sending her off with these words, he watched Emilia's back vanishing into the Tomb. Then, beginning from the entrance, one by one the lights lit up, just as it did for Subaru when he entered in the morning.

And just like this, Emilia's footsteps trailed on, into the depths of the Tomb. It seemed that the Trials would be taking place deep within that corridor. Even further than what Subaru could have seen in the morning when he strained his eyes trying to see the end.

[Lewes: Worry's written all over your face, kiddo]

Then, walking up beside Subaru, who had worry all over his eyes, it was a little girl—or the full grown adult living inside what looked like one: Lewes, who called out to him. Unbefitting of her cute and childish features, what was adorning her face was a somehow aged and ancient smile,

[Lewes: It'll be alright, there's no need to worry. The Trials, or whatever exaggerated name you call it, is not life-threatening or anything]

[Subaru: You know about the contents of the Trials, then?]

[Lewes: I have taken part in it myself. Being half-blood and qualified, it was only natural. Although in the end, I did not pass..... see, I'm still well and kicking about]

Lewes did a little hop on the spot to show that she was still healthy. And seeing her trying to use that almost adorable gesture to wipe away his anxiety, from deep within his heart, Subaru appreciated her consideration, and,

[Subaru: Then, is that how you got to become a Loli on the outside and an acceleratedly-aged Granny on the inside? If Emilia-tan becomes loli Emilia-tan it'll be really cute too, but would Emilia-tan really like that?]

[Lewes: I must have been stupid to have taken you seriously enough to not expect a reply like that. You know, Su-bo, you're just like Gar-bo, and don't know how to respect your elders at all]

[Subaru: What gave you that idea? Actually, I feel much better now. I made you worried about me there, sorry about that]

Seeing Subaru lowering his head, Lewes sighed shaking her head [Why didn't you just say that in the first place], and pretended to wipe away non-existent tears with her long, wrist-less sleeves.

Waiting, and watching all this from the side, Garfiel crossed his arms with a grossed-out expression, then quietly turned, to gaze at the Tomb. Surprisingly, Otto and Ram seem to have struck up a conversation about something, and seem to have established a certain degree of friendly understanding.

For Subaru, who had very little experience in friendly conversation with Ram, witnessing this sight was actually an extremely big deal.

"I'll need to do something about this. I better ask Otto to teach me the specific techniques of talking to Ram without setting her off." Subaru quietly swore to himself in his heart, before turning his attention to the Tomb once again.

Without realizing it, he had found himself with his hands in front of his waist, rubbing his thumb against each other as if he was praying.

It was painful, not to be able to do anything but wait. Compared to being left behind and waiting like this, it would have been easier if he just took the Trial himself.

But just as this conceited notion flashed across his mind, along with it, a change came about before him.

[————!]

Seeing this change, in the same moment everyone present gasped.

Repeatedly blinking, like a conditioned response adjusting to the darkness after losing the only source light, in any case,

[Subaru: The Tomb's lights went out!?!]

[Lewes: While the Trials are still ongoing the lights should stay on.....]

[Subaru: You mean they're not supposed to go out!?!]

Looking toward Lewes who was supposed to know everything, even her wise little eyes seemed confused at this. It was more than enough to tell him that the situation wasn't within their expectations.

Whether it was Garfiel, unfolding his arms and running over, Ram, who was furrowing her brows, or the panicking Otto, it seemed no one had any advice to offer.

In that case,

[Lewes: Su-bo!? You don't have the Qualification, it won't let you in.....]

[Subaru: I've been paying good attention to the lectures, so I got the Qualifications too, you know. ——Now let me have look inside. No matter how Emilia-tan is, I'll pull her out!]

He will not stand by and wait.

The same moment when Subaru fearlessly stepped into the entrance, the lights of the corridor lit up once more just like when Emilia had entered.

Sensing Lewes and Garfiel gasping behind him, before they could say anything to stop him, Subaru had already dashed into the Tomb.

The corridor was still filled with dust, and a single breath was enough to bring discomfort to the lungs.

His echoing footsteps striking loudly upon the floor, Subaru charged into the depth of the corridor—— into the depths of the Tomb.

[Subaru: Damnit, I messed up. Why did I keep myself back like some trump card until something went wrong, I should have just went in together with Emilia.....aaaaaaAA]

With regret pouring out of his lips, Subaru ran.

Then, suddenly, as he saw the light reaching the end of the corridor, he had arrived inside a small room.

Sliding to halt his steps, Subaru looked around the little chamber. While it could be called a room, it was more like a grotesque rectangular space with four corners carved out.

Without any furnishing, there was only a single door adorned by cyan-white lamps.

——And, on the floor in front of that door, was a silver haired girl lying there.

[Subaru: ——Emilia!!]

Crying out, Subaru dashed over to her fallen body.

Holding up her delicate form in his arms, no matter what, he will take her out of here——

{——First, you must face your past}

The next moment, a sensation of something whispering beside his ear struck his consciousness.

What could that voice be, there was no time for that thought.

Falling on his knees, unable to move, Subaru's body collapsed like a doll. Rolling onto the floor from the momentum, he sprawled out upon the ground at Emilia's side.

Then, lying beside the unconscious Emilia, Subaru's consciousness too, was dragged into oblivion——.

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——Beginning to wake from his slumber, Subaru sucked in the breath as if sticking his head out of the surface of the water. It was that sensation of emerging out of an ocean of sleep, yearning for reality like a body yearning for air——

[???: GUMMMMMMOOOOO—————NINGU, SON!!]

[Subaru: WaaAAHMMURABI HO-TEN!!] (*"Code of Hammurabi" >_<)

This poetic morning greeting struck him with an all-destructive impact.

Tasting the pain of a weight pressing down on him and squeezing all the air out of his gut,

Subaru's just-woken-up body jumped itself out of bed along with all of that weight, before descending into a vicious bout of coughing.

[??? : Oyoyoy, what's this what's this. It's only the usual DIVING-PRESS-of-love to wake you up. Your carelessness is BURNING this time!]

[Subaru: Gahk, ehk, what did you expect..... from a sleeping opponent.....come on]

What on earth has happened, he lifted up his face with tears in his eyes. And there, the person standing in front of Subaru's half-stuck out body turned around his head,

[Dad: What's that now. You look like you've just seen your middle-aged dad fully-naked first thing in the morning, you!]

That man, saying this while striking out a POSE, was Subaru's middle-aged father *half*-naked in the morning——Natsuki Kenichi, heartily laughing, blessing his son out of his slumber.



Chapter 16 [A Morning In The Natsuki Household]

“HA-HAHA”, listening to the deafening laugh, Subaru gave his head a light shake to cast away the last bit of his drowsiness. When it came to waking up naturally, he was always rather proud of being able to wake up in an instant, but being forced awake by an outside force was a different matter.

As though the blood still hadn’t returned to his brain, Subaru rubbed his eyelids that were slightly aching, then hazily looked around at his surroundings—— when his old familiar room flooded into his sight.

The shelves were packed full of mangas and light-novels, sloppily yanked-off jeans and jerseys were strewn all over the floor. The study-desk that hadn’t been used for its proper purpose in ages was piled up with half-read books, and there was the ancient Televideo-with-recording-functionality that was now exclusively used for gaming, whose very existence elicited sympathy from anyone who looked at it.

Lying on a futon that hadn’t been dried in the sun for ages, cracking the joints of his neck, for some reason, Subaru couldn’t help but feel a sense of incongruity in front of this familiar landscape. ——And just what could that rustling in his chest be?

[Dad: O~y oy, being ignored will even make an old guy like me wanna cry, you know? It’s a fresh and sunny morning, so get carried along by the mood and jump like ~DONG~ and you’re up!]

[Subaru: You mean welcome the morning feeling refreshed and invigorated after getting woken up by a diving-press? Stop it with the jokes, come on. It’s more like “I think I hear my bones making a noise now, I better go back to sleep and heal up”]

Turning down the attempt to wake him up, once again Subaru tugged himself back into the futon. Seeing Subaru turning his back to him and leaving no room for negotiations, the one standing up beside the futon started making a displeased

[W~H~A~T~I~S~T~H~I~S~~] noise,

[Dad: It's the rebellious-stage! The rebellious-stage isn't it!? I always knew this day will come, but I didn't think it'd come this morning, I'm not prepared yet! Instead of preparing breakfast I should have prepared a good proper talk with my son! D~A~M~N~I~T, I hate to be so powerle.....ss]

[Subaru: If you're saying that, why're you still grabbing onto my leg.....Oy, wait, ow! OooowOWOWOW!]

[Dad: AL~~~RIGHT, I've decided to have a good talk you with all the way till tomorrow morning. First is body language! FIGURE-FOUR FIGURE-FOUR! There, it's good for waking up the joints isn't it!]

His legs being twisted into a figure-four leglock, Subaru flapped around to the other side while Kenichi dealt critical-damage to his knees and shins. And the louder Subaru wailed in agony, the more heartily Kenichi laughed, as though overwhelmed by the joys of life.

[Dad: OHO, what's this what's this. All grown up and exercising every day, aren't you embarrassed to have such a hard time against a middle aged old man? Mwahahaha..... OW, wait, ow! Hurtshurtshurtshurts!]

[Subaru: Fool! Choosing to use the easily-counteracted four-figure leglock as your attack, dad must be getting old! Turning my body I'll return the damage in equal force, taking vengeance on the one who got me in this figure-four leg.....ow, wait, don't flip don't flip.....Owow! OWOWOW!]

With arms and legs stretched out, the two grown men tangled each other up in their back and forth rumbling. Each time, the assailant and victim exchanged places to let out out their shrieks of agony, while their commotion sent books flopping off the desk and knocked the game-station falling to its side.

And just as their father and son brawl in the morning was going on in full force——

[???: ——Hold it a minute you two. Mom's getting hungry you know, I kind of wanna eat breakfast]

Hearing the sound of the leisurely voice and the off-beat knocking flying into the room, their alternating attacks on each other's joints halted in place.

Half crying from the pain, in the corner of Subaru's murky vision, he saw the person standing in the doorway of the room——it was a woman with a certain absent-minded atmosphere about her, standing there with a vicious-looking gaze. While at first sight, the sharpness of her gaze might give off the impression that she was in a bad mood, in reality, after having known her for over 17 years, Subaru knew that she wasn't actually thinking about anything in particular.

Just by their dangerous-looking eyes, it was be enough to tell that they were mother and son, for she was Subaru's mother, Natsuki Naoko.

With mom showing up, Kenichi let out a [Oh crap!], and stuck out his tongue and jumped himself up,

[Dad: My bad my bad, I got too carried away with my intimate-time with Subaru. But you could've eaten first if you want]

[Mom: ——? But families eat together in the morning, how could I eat first? Isn't it better when everyone eats together?]

Confused by Kenichi's words, Naoko tilted her head with a question mark floating above her head. It's not that she was mocking him or anything, it seemed more like she was just saying exactly what she was thinking.

Seeing his wife like that, Kenichi vigorously nodded his head,

[Dad: Aha, is that so. That's the woman I married! Alright I understand. Breakfast tastes better when everyone's eating together!]

[Mom: Breakfast lunch or dinner, I don't think that really changes the taste, does it? It's just when everyone eats together we can clean all the dishes in one go]

[Dad: Aw. You meant dishes. Sorry, I got myself all pumped up there]

Hearing that natural explanation, the face that looked like he had just said a really good line slumped down. Drooping his shoulders, Kenichi looked at Naoko with an incredulous expression, but Naoko only continued staring at Subaru, who was still lying there like that.

[Mom: You come to eat too, Subaru. I worked hard for Subaru's breakfast this morning, after all]

And then, she gave him a faint and cheerful smile, in a way that only those closest to her could understand.

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——Rubbing his sleepy eyes as he begrudgingly made his way down to the dining table on the first floor, Subaru's hazy consciousness was suddenly awoken by the impact of a certain smell.

[Subaru: Mom... Even though you said you worked hard to make this for me.....]

[Mom: En. Mom worked really hard for Subaru. I've been up and about preparing this since the morning]

"Fufu", Naoko was proudly humphing from her nose for some reason. Unable to pick up any trace of a guilty conscience in that attitude, Subaru sighed.

Following behind Subaru's sigh, coming back from the bathroom and taking a look at the dining table, Kenichi let out a sort of [Oh] with an exclamation mark on top of it.

[Dad: That's cool, Subaru. You got a special-menu on your plate. It's like a green forest]

[Subaru: Thanks for pointing that out. En, it really does feel like that.....What's, going on with this, exactly? How come only my plate has got a luxuriant pile of green peas plopped on it?]

Nodding at Kenichi's observation, Subaru pointed to the pile——laid in front of his usual seat, beside the rest of the breakfast, the dish that had a certain eerie atmosphere floating about it. There was giant pile of green peas hoarded there like it was trying to avenge the death of its family members, and it was unclear whether it completely buried all other food underneath so that only peas were visible, or there wasn't any other food on that plate in the first place. Just as a side-note, Subaru hated peas.

[Mom: Well, some time ago Subaru mentioned hating green peas, right? Mom thought it's not good to be picky with your food. So, I took this opportunity to let you eat loots of it so you can overcome it]

[Subaru: So you just recalled a random memory from "some time ago" and decided to fix my bad habit huh. And what opportunity.....it's not a special day or anything, right?]

[Dad: Fufu, you're still green, Subaru. Alright listen up, no matter what time it is, this day, and this moment of this day can only ever be experienced here and now. You may think that there will always be another day exactly like this one again, but by doing so you will have allowed countless "ONLY" moments to escape.....]

[Subaru: That's, enough for now]

Pushing Kenichi, who had casually danced himself into the conversation, aside, Subaru let out a deep, drawn out sigh, and got into his seat. Then, pushing the plate with the heap of peas away from himself,

[Subaru: Anyways, I appreciate the thought of especially preparing this for me, but I'll pass on the peas. I don't want to fill up my stomach with something I hate first thing in the morning]

[Mom: There you are with that again. Then, if there's nothing left to eat in the world except green peas, what will you do. You'll eat them then, won't you]

[Subaru: In that kind of world, we'll all die of nutritional imbalance pretty soon anyway, so it's not like eating the peas would do much good. So I, will absolutely not eat it]

Replying to Naoko's crummy argument with one of his own, Subaru folded his arms and pumped up his chest,

[Subaru: Even if Armageddon came down, I will absolutely not eat peas]

[Dad: Gees, you'll lose out on life if you're picky with food like this. Oh, mom, I'll trade you the tomato in my salad, I don't like'em so you eat'em for me]

[Subaru: That's just my father.....already contradicting the first half of his sentence with the second half]

Dad placed his reviled tomatoes into mom's salad, and pilfered some of mom's egg-pieces in return. Since it was their regular exchange, no one complained about this quiet understanding between husband and wife. Glancing to his side, Subaru turned to the rest of the breakfast besides the peas—— in front of the steaming miso soup, and the honey-toast with an extravagant amount of honey on it, Subaru clapped his hands together,

[Subaru: Come to think of it, why the East-West combination?]

[Mom: Mom had a bunch of kelp for the miso soup, and loves honey on bread]

That wasn't really an answer. But, it was too much of a bother to point that out. Even if he does raise an objection here, he'll probably only get Naoko tilting her head as a reply. Subaru quietly said [Itadakimasu] as he brought the miso soup to his lips, and Kenichi and Naoko sat down into their respective seats as well——neatly opposite from Subaru's. The two also clapped their hands together with an [Itadakimasu], and then, with the same exact motion, they sipped at their miso soup. No one noticed it, but the three of them did it together in a perfectly synchronized pattern.

[Dad: Oooh, this miso soup.....Mom, did your cooking get better while I wasn't looking?]

[Mom: You noticed? Actually, yesterday I recorded a 3-minute cooking show, you know]

So, what about that.

Listening to Naoko's out-of-tune reply to Kenichi's all too convenient prompt, Subaru's face started twitching. Judging from how Naoko always said things exactly as they are, when she said "recorded", she probably did just that and only recorded it without actually watching it. And then, most likely, just left it there without ever watching it. In fact,

[Subaru: Considering what dad let slip earlier in the morning, the miso soup and toast was all made by dad, wasn't it]

[Dad: Oyoy, sharp-eyes, my son. So you've noticed.....the contradictions in the testimony and raised your *OBJECTION!* based on the evidence?]

[Subaru: Why are you still addicted to that ancient game in this day and age! Although yes, that was totally a classic!]

He must have taken the gameboy from Subaru's table or something. It must have been great for killing time in between work... but just imagining the sight of a middle aged old man leaning in on a gameboy made Subaru's back itch.

And, chewing on the sweet toast while saying this, Subaru went on with [By the way...]

[Subaru: What time is it now, dad, why are you still so scantily clad? Sure it's almost getting warm soon, but no matter what, going around in just a running-shirt and long underpants is taking casual a bit too far, isn't it]

[Dad: Aren't you in your long underpants too? Besides, dad's just like that you know, waking up early in the morning I got a TENSION so I went down to the yard for a dry-towel rub-down or something]

[Subaru: Dry-towel rub-down, isn't that something that only helps when it's cold out?] (* 乾布摩擦 is a "Japanese custom where one rubs a dry towel along the body to create warmth and friction, particularly in cold weather, to promote good health or ward off disease" -Wikipedia)

[Dad: That's just a motivational problem! If you get too caught up with that kind of concerns before setting out, you'll never get where you want to go. Come on, mom, back me up here]

[Mom: That's right, Subaru. Since it's not cold out, I used a really cold gaze to stare at your dad while he's doing his rub-down, you know]

[Dad: That!? Honey, that wasn't backing me up at all!?!]

[Mom: Ehh.....Wasn't that backing you up? It was a really really cold stare you know]

[Dad: That's not a back-up that's a deathblow!?!]

Seeing Kenichi swinging back and forth creaking his chair to demonstrate his displeasure, Naoko only made the off-beat comment [That's going to get the dust flying, I'll have to clean that up later].

Watching his parents like this, Subaru lowered his eyes and continued to eat his breakfast. Then, Subaru pushed the plate of green peas in front of Kenichi, and since Kenichi hated them too, he pushed it in front of Naoko, and Naoko pushed it back to Subaru again, completing the vicious cycle.

[Subaru: Looks like we've got a pattern where definitely nobody is going to eat these. What're we gonna do, we got this huge pile of peas. Here, you eat these, mom, take responsibility]

[Mom: But, mom hates green peas.....]

[Subaru: Then what were you doing trying to get other people to overcome their pickiness!?!]

[Mom: Ah, but don't misunderstand. Mom doesn't just hate green peas.....it's little round things in general. It's really gross to put them in my mouth]

[Subaru: What misunderstanding, that just made you sound less and less credible!]

Actually, he had never seen his mother put anything pea-shaped in her mouth before, so thinking this, he pushed the plate toward Kenichi this time.

[Subaru: Then, the wife's responsibility is the husband's to take, so dad you eat it]

[Dad: Don't say something that sounds so lonely, Subaru. We're a close and friendly family that's really rare these days, right? That means if you and mom hate it, I hate it too]

[Subaru: It's making nobody happy and is just a load of trouble, this green plate!]

They're green peas that nobody wants to put in their mouths. At last, it was Kenichi who made the decision [We could mix it into pilaf as a last resort. We attack it with so much rice and meat that it disappears, heheheh!] with a mad-scientist look on his face. If it was mixed it into something else, then Subaru would probably find it a bit more tolerable, but Naoko still maintains that gross things are still gross whatever they're mixed into. So in the end, it was the two men who got stuck with eating the concoction.

—

[Subaru: I'm full]

[Dad: Oui, Osumatsu-san. Alright, wash your dishes really quick, time to get everything digested and get ready for the competitions at school, Subaru!] (**Osumatsu-san おそ松さん is a cartoon character, it sounds the same as お粗末さん "Mr.Coarse"*)

[Subaru: I'm already tired of hearing these fluent patterns to push me back to school. In fact, I don't remember being raised as the kind of brat who runs off as soon as he's done eating]

Placing the dishes into the sink, Kenichi turned back and sparkled his teeth. But seeing this, Subaru shrugged and got up from the dining table. And leaving behind in a quiet voice, [I'll sleep till noon], scratching at his head, he made his way toward his bedroom on the second floor——Then, his legs suddenly stopped.

[Subaru: Wha-, t's.....?]

Feeling a pain running through his temples, Subaru lightly pressed his head and closed his eyes. A dazzling light was flashing behind his closed eyelids. A scalding heat was burning deep inside his throat.

Something was wrong. Something strange was happening.

Looking back, Subaru saw his parents' faces.

Kenichi's lips were pouted up, disappointed at his invitation being turned down, and Naoko was wiping the dining table with a cloth, watching Subaru with a lonely look in her eyes.

Facing his father and mother's gazes——noticing the emotions they carried, Subaru could no longer ignore the torture of the heat inside his chest. Feeling his face burning up, hastily turning his back so they could not see his expression, Subaru ran away——Rather, he ran into his own bedroom.

[Subaru: What is this? Why, why am I feeling like this?]

Holding his chest, Subaru was panting, surprised by the speed his own pulse. Dropping onto the futon like he was collapsing, he restlessly turned his eyes all around the room. His room was the same as when woke up. Nor was it any different from the room where he fell asleep the night before. Just as it had always been, no change had befallen this room as it continued in its stagnation.

Like a perfect projection, of the stagnation of its master, Subaru.

Looking at the clock, it was 8am in the morning. School starts at 8:30, it takes about 20 minutes from his house on bike. It's not impossible to get there in time.

Nevertheless, Subaru did not move to change, but only hugged his knees on top of the futon, still staring at the movements of the clock hand. Second by second, the second-hand ticked, until quietly, the minute-hand ticked its tenth——the deadline had passed. ——He could no longer make it to school today.

[Subaru: So there's, nothing I can do. That's right, there's nothing I can do]

If there had been a little more time for him to gather his resolve, perhaps he would have went. But, reality had heartless imposed a time limit on Subaru.

Therefore, there was no longer a choice for him today. Yet even so,

[Subaru:Usually, I should have calmed down by now. What's going on?]

His heartbeat wouldn't settle, his ragged breathing showed no sign of steadying.

Confused by what was happening to his body, Subaru was frightened even by the sound of the his own teeth clacking.

——For Subaru, this time of every morning was the most terrifying time of the day.

[Subaru: Calm down, calm down.....the time had passed. It's alright to calm down now. It's alright]

Pressing his shivering body, again and again Subaru told this to himself.

It was time that this harrowing daily ritual ended. Tomorrow morning, at the exact same time, he will be met with the exact same horror again, but at least he has overcome it for today.

No one was there to rush him, and no one was there to force him. The only person haunting him, drilling that anxiety into his heart, was no one but Subaru himself.

Whether or not to go to school——that choice alone was forcing this time of anguish upon Subaru.

Having refused to go, having been an absentee-truant for so long, unable to face up to his own weakness, now, it was only a matter of adding wrong on top of wrong.

Waiting for time to pass in the torture of his own self loathing and inferiority complex, until, confirming that the chance to go to school was already gone, he would be liberated for the remainder of the day to be spent in slothfulness.

Precisely because he had experienced this agony day after day, he knew more than anyone what the relief of the liberation felt like. Clinging onto his own weakness, he could

do nothing but to continue to find excuses, however grotesque they may be. Yet, granting absolutely all of that, the time should have already passed——
[Subaru: But why only today.....]

His sense of guilt, of self loathing, his unease stuck tight onto him, refusing to disappear. Unable to understand the source of that anxiety making him want to tear his chest open, not even his breathing can be relied on as he lay drenched in sickening sweat, writhing in agony on top of his futon.

All this time, branded into his mind, his parents' faces as he left the dining table would not leave him.

The familiar expressions, the familiar conversations, the familiar bickerings, the familiar betrayal, the familiar Sloth —— that's how it should have been.

But only today, that same familiar routine, that had already happened so many times before, was tormenting his heart to no end.

——Thinking back, ever since the moment he woke up this morning, something had felt amiss.

His father Kenichi had always been thinking up all sorts of ingenious ways to harass Subaru out of sleep. After Subaru started refusing to go to school, even after he had become a failure in every sense of the word, his father did not change the way he treated him. Indeed, even the interactions this morning were the same as they had always been for the past 17 years—— then what could be so special about this morning, that something besides the Diving-Press should now be causing this pain inside his chest?

While his mother Naoko's misdirected tenderness were almost always overwhelmingly ineffectual, she would always put Subaru first. With Subaru holed up in the house, the dedicated housewife Naoko naturally had plenty of time to spend with him. But even so, as if leaving it all to time, she continued to watch over Subaru from a distance with her constant and gentle gaze. ——In the dining areas, he would often notice that gaze without meaning to.

He could not understand why, even now, after the time to leave for school had already passed, the agitation was still burning in his body.

[Subaru: Something's wrong. What's going on? What's happened? Surely yesterday was.....]

Thinking back on what he did the day before, racking his brain to think of what could have happened between then and this morning—— a numbing sensation stopped him.

As though fiery sparks were flying from the depths of his eyes, each time, a scalding heat surged up, as if to reject Subaru's attempt to touch that memory. Incredulous, Subaru tried once more to challenge the sea of memories——and once again he failed. No matter how he tried, the response was be the same.

Yesterday, or the day before, or even further before that, Subaru had passed the days without having done anything.

As for the pain in his chest this moment, this morning, he could not think of anything out of the ordinary that could explain it.

It must have been a coincidence, that he felt the guilt and pain more intensely today. Until today, he hadn't truly paid attention to his parents' faces, and that, overlapping with everything else, must have been why.

[Dad: ——Mi~nd if I come in, Subaru?]

And, as even that conclusion failed to ease Subaru's sickness in the slightest, he heard a voice coming in from the other side of the door.

Turning his eyes to the door, he saw Kenichi peeping in with half his body before smoothly gliding himself into the room. With agile footwork almost reminiscent of the King of Pop, as he completed his glide——

[Subaru: If you come in before the other person answers, what's the point of even knocking?]

[Dad: Oyoy, with the firm bond of father and son between us, there's no reason to bicker about minor details like knocking, right?Oh wait, there is. That's right, occasionally young men in puberty might want to do something that require holing themselves up in a room alone. OK I got it. I'll come back in ten minutes or so]

[Subaru: Don't just jump to random conclusions and then set aside realistic time-frame for them! It's alright nothing's going on!]

Shouting out the assurance that there was no need for that kind of consideration, although Subaru was snorting roughly, deep down he was relieved by the distraction. Hearing Subaru's reply, Kenichi let out a [Really?] with a suspicious-looking expression, before turning around and doing a Moon-Walk right back into the room.

And, turning to face his son, who was staring up at him, right then and there he did a POSE with his finger pointing up toward the ceiling.

[Dad: Then, Subaru. Well it's pretty self-evident I guess, but truth is I have a day-off today]

[Subaru: En, I already noticed. Still helping with housework this late on a Monday morning, even I would have noticed it. So, what about it]

[Dad: Well, don't be so eager to rush to the ending. There are just, some things I wanted to talk about, so, this is an opportunity to talk about all of them, or something, isn't it]

[Subaru: Talk about what? Like washing my own dishes after eating?]

[Dad: Well that too. Dad hates washing dishes you know. It's fun doing the preparations and cooking so I like that lot, but after that I lose my motivation]

The already wobbling Kenichi crumbled. Seeing his usually overactive father like this, Subaru furrowed his brows, and couldn't help but sense that his father was somehow hesitating about something.

Avoiding the main subject, joking around to buy enough time to gather up resolve in both of their hearts—— and not doing a very good job of it, Subaru had the exact same

personality as well.

Of course, the resemblance was only natural.

[Subaru:——hurts]

The moment he thought this, the piercing pain struck Subaru's head once again.

A pain like pins planting themselves into his temples, feeling as if the bones inside of his skull were being scraped, Subaru turned down his face to hide his agonized expression.

[Subaru: So, what is it? That my unmotivated dad wants to talk to me about]

[Dad: Oh, right. Subaru, is there a girl you like?]

[Subaru: ——I'm in highschool!!!]

Prompting the conversation to cover up the pain, he overreacted to the question that was so stupid that it made him forget he was in pain in the first place.

Seeing Subaru lifting up his face angrily, Kenichi waved both his arms around

[Ooo~OooOO~],

[Dad: With an overreaction like that, you might as well be admitting to having a girl you like, you know]

[Subaru: What're you saying with that smug look on your face. Even if I am dumbstruck, lamenting, or sighing it still wouldn't mean a thing]

And in reality, that wasn't the case anyway.

Chasing girls was not the sort of thing Subaru was interested in right now. He didn't have one, and he couldn't get one even if he wanted to. That was what he firmly believed, at least.

[Dad: Whaaa, that's no fun. Did you try the advice dad gave you when you were little?

Girls are weak to situations involving promises that span years into the future, so if you kept getting potential girls to promise themselves to you ten years later, you'd be setting up the FLAGS in advance for your conquest routes once you're in your teens]

[Subaru: Yeah and then I was naive enough to actually believe that, and really went around making pinky promises with girls all over the place, and now the whole region's got a ban on pinky promises. Apparently because there were too many cases involving this scary-faced kid forcing little girls to swallow-a-thousand-needles!]

[Dad:Well, it's a good thing you inherited that sweet mask from your dad. You got the short legs, your mom's eyes, your dad's TENSION, and your mom's absent-mindedness, it's like all the stat allocations when you came out of your mom's belly got screwed up]

[Subaru: You should have told me that while I was still on the umbilical cord.....]

Reminiscing together on those painful memories, the tension between the father and son eased a little. And, noticing that they've gotten sidetracked, with a [So?] Subaru returned to the topic,

[Subaru: What was it you wanted to talk about. After we're done I still have the important mission of my second nap and my third nap to attend to, so please leave a message after the *BEEP* and quietly exit the room and go chat about it with mom]

[Dad: Don't boot me out with that natural-flow now... Besides, your mom wouldn't actually get it. My wife and your mom is the most un-observant lifeform in the world, you know. Although she's super cute that way]

Listening to his father's puppy-love remark, Subaru put on an annoyed-look on his face. But seeing this, Kenichi let out an [Ennn~~], and then, looking upwards, swiping his nose like a mischievous little boy,

[Dad: You know what. The weather is really nice today—— why don't we go outside for a nice heart-to-heart, between father and son]

Chapter 17 [Love Story]

[???: Ooh, Ken-san, sure's rare seeing you wandering around in the morning. Finally got laid off?]

[Dad: Don't give me that crap, that place'll grind to halt without me. They just didn't want me to work too hard and take everyone else's jobs, so they let me rest a bit to giv'em some motivation]

Even though the owner of the neighborhood bakery passing on a bicycle was only making a friendly greeting, Kenichi threw a middle finger right back at him, cursing. They continued the rowdy conversation like this for a bit, before finally waving goodbye.

[Dad: Gees, whenever he sees someone on holiday that he hasn't seen in awhile he goes on about laid-off laid-off. I got a loving family to provide for here, how can I do something as incompetent as that. Even if I did do something that'd get me fired, it's not like I'd let'em catch me, heheh]

[Subaru: As someone you're providing for, I sincerely hope that rather than being good at hiding it, you actually hadn't done anything that'd get yourself fired for]

His hands shoved inside the pockets of his jersey, Subaru, who had been waiting at the side of the road for the conversation to finish, shrugged his shoulders. Seeing his son standing in the shade being blown by the wind, Kenichi waved both his hands with [Oyoy], shaking his head,

[Dad: A man who has forgotten the sense of adventure wouldn't grow, you know? Doing bad things is a different matter, but the view is always best from the edge of the thin line, isn't it.....]

[Subaru: You're way past the age to be saying stupid things like that, you should've settle down by now. You're already over 40 and still talking about those impractical things like a little kid]

[Dad: Men are supposed to keep their childish innocence even after they've grown up. Besides, you're the one who's at an age to say those stupid lines, but you don't join in the conversations, so dad has no choice but to say them for you. What's up with that anyway]

[Subaru: Nothing's up, I just can't talk to random old guys I don't know]

[Dad: He's not a random old guy, I always buy bread from him on my way home. Also, he was my junior in highschool, he was one grade below me]

But Subaru still wouldn't know him even if he told him that.

He didn't usually pay attention to the bread packaging, and he never passed by that bakery personally.

As Subaru's silence gave off the feeling that the conversation was coming to an end, Kenichi smacked his tongue saying [It can't be helped, I guess],

[Dad: On such a sunny and refreshing morning, you with that stink face is going to piss off Mr.Sun-sama you know. You look like you're being interrogated or something]

[Subaru: If I look like I'm being interrogated, it'd be because my dad pulled me out here by force, wouldn't it..... I said no and you still pulled me out]

[Dad: You just *looked* like you were resisting, but your body followed along nicely, right? See, you still love your old man, Subaru. Rest assured, I love you too. Second only to your mom, of course!]

Swinging out his strides again, Kenichi, laughing and in a good mood, roughly patted Subaru on the back. The force made Subaru raise his brows, and somehow, he felt like something was different about Kenichi's high spirits.

Well, his father always had this kind of TENSION about him, but usually the hyper-moody

Kenichi would probably have fussed for a long time about their conversation just now. He didn't know why, but this morning his father seemed especially tolerating. —Unlike Subaru, who was walking alongside him feeling like his chest was about to be crushed.

[Subaru: So um.....]

[Dad: Yeah?]

[Subaru: So, you brought me out here because you had something to say, right? Usually you wouldn't go to so much trouble..... so what is it? It's something you couldn't say at home, isn't it]

Wondering if it was something he didn't want mom to hear, Subaru asked this. No matter what it was, Subaru had a vaguely bad feeling about it. Either way, what else could it be except to reproach him for his anemic lifestyle? When their daily conversations were separated by a layer of futon, he could have ignored them if he wished to, but outside, he couldn't do this. Although, he could always shout loudly and shut it all out. If he embarrassed himself like this outdoors, perhaps Kenichi would change his attitude, and maybe he'd even drop Subaru's——no, thinking up to this point, Subaru shook his head.

[Subaru: If it's my father, he'd probably get a kick out of being shamed.....]

[Dad: Even though I don't know what you're imagining there, what's with that kinky remark all of a sudden? This is just a nice average everyday family conversation under the sun you know]

[Subaru: Really, it's a bit hard to believe you..... But I'll trust you for now]

[Dad: That's it that's it. By the way, Subaru, do you uh..... want a little brother or sister?]

[Subaru: It's a bit frightening to be asked this question when I'm 17 years old!!]

The change of topic that flew in slanted made Subaru shudder and raise his voice. Seeing Subaru panting with his shoulders going up and down, Kenichi bared his teeth with a smile [Joking, joking],

[Dad: Although your mom and I are still lovey-dovey, it'd be stretching it a bit to make another person at our age. So that means, all of me and mom's love are all reserved for you alone. Happy?]

[Subaru: Aah, yeah yeah, happy happy.You really were just joking right?]

[Dad: Oyoy, don't be like that. If you give me that face I might just get excited after all and go make a new one you know?]

Sensing they've come to a point where joking around wouldn't be enough anymore, Subaru only gazed at him silently at end of that sentence. And, wryly smiling in return, Kenichi received his meaning.

——Subaru and his father had arrived at a scenic path that was about 10 minutes away from the house.

It was a land where a river that was famous around these parts flowed through. Along the banks, were planted cherry-blossom trees that would become an attraction during the spring. But of course, the season was already over, and instead of pink cherry-blossom petals, it was luscious green grass covering the ground, bathed under the bright rays of the sun.

After breakfast, and before the end of school hours, Subaru, being tormented by the guilt and anxiety of the passage of that time, was brought here by Kenichi.

At first, when he left the house, he had been worried that he might be brought all the way to school this way.

[Dad: You know you look kinda wary whenever we turn toward the direction of the school. But it's not what you think, we just took the long way round to the river bank]

Having read through his thoughts, Kenichi sneakily dragged Subaru here.

A sweet scent of plants and grass blew over the top of the embankments, and if one merely stretched a little, one would be able to see the full view of the gentle river on the other side of the fence.

[Dad: This fence didn't use to be here in the olden days. I used to always play here in the river with buddies of mine, it was great fun. Oh, right, you remember Ikeda? One day a typhoon came, and we wanted to see how great the river had become, and that guy wound up getting carried away by the current..... That time, there just happened to be an old uncle who had just got his lifeguard license passing by, Ikeda would've been dead if it weren't for him]

[Subaru: So this fence, was dad and this Ikeda guy's fault then?]

[Dad: Nah couldn't have.....no, wait a minute? Timing-wise it does seem to kinda strangely match up now that I think about it]

Leaning against the fence, gazing out toward the river, Kenichi, reminiscing about the by-gone days, tilted his head. Behind his father, Subaru, who seemed bored, only looked around him.

Before noon on a working day, it was only natural that there was not many people around. Or, more accurately, there was no one else except Subaru and Kenichi. It wasn't an easy place to get to in the first place. If anyone wandered around here at this time, it could only be the custodian, or someone who really loved this place.

Just as he thought this, Subaru heard someone's footsteps on the grass.

[???: Ooooh? I was wonderin' who it is, isn't this Ken-bo? What's this what's this, still playing by the river at this age?]

[Dad: Speak of the devil..... it's the uncle from the custodian's hut, they still didn't get someone to replace you? You'll be the one surprised though, I wore my beach-trunks today instead of my river-trunks, so I can't get in there even if I want to]

[Old Man: Don't gimme that. I don't see no difference between beach-trunks and river-trunks, that's just a load of crap from the guy who jumped in the river in his underpants. But come to think of it, it's been a long time since I seen ya]

Climbing up the banks, a short, hunching old man greeted Kenichi and shook his hand. He looked kind of like a nice grandpa, and was wearing an old green uniform. Judging from the conversation and the logo on his back, he must have been the custodian of the embankments.

In fact, if he knew Kenichi back when he was still playing in the river, he must have been a veteran at that.

In their long awaited reunion, the two of them laughed and chatted, and then, the old man made a clap with his hands,

[Old Man: Oh, right, if you're here, what happened to your friend Ikeda? That guy sure gets carried away often, even my net was wearin' out from catchin' him]

[Dad: That bastard Ikeda, won big on a horse-ticket 10 years ago, and took his load of money to Thailand and haven't heard a word of him since. Just the New Years greetings, Summer greetings, Winter greetings, Christmas, Father's day and Mother's day and random letters like that]

[Subaru: That sounds like a lot of correspondence for someone who you haven't heard a word of since.....]

Unable to resist the urge, Subaru had to mutter that straight-man observation. Then, hearing the quiet mutter, the old man looked over and raised his brows as if only suddenly noticing Subaru's presence there.

[Old Man: Ooooh, you got a little buddy ere.....eh? Could this be your...]

[Dad: Aaah, that's right, this is my son. No, I should say my BELOVED SON]

[Old Man: Ooh, is that so! I got the feeling he looked like you when you wer little..... no, not too much though. He didn't take after ya. Took after his mother more.....I'm guessin'?]

[Dad: Yeahyeah. People often say that. Especially the eyes]

The most prominent thing on that otherwise plain face was his Sanpaku eyes. His mother's eyes were so sharp it felt as though there were steel beams inside, and this part of him in particular, was certainly his mother's influence showing through.

With that harmless remark, the old man walked up to Subaru,

[Old Man: S'that right s'that right, but it sure surprised me there. So Ken-bo already has a son this big, how the time passes quickly. Then again, I'm getting old. Even if Ikeda got himself drowned again I won't be able to save him]

[Subaru: Even for Ikeda, I doubt he'd go play in the river and get himself drowned at this age.....]

[Old Man: Sure hope not.....They really were brats who wouldn't sit still though, these two. Especially your father, back then he was causin' trouble all over the place. So, what bring you wandering around town this time of day anyway?]

[Subaru:Eeh, well]

Subaru mumbled this reply. Hearing this, the old man looked as if he had picked something up, and frowned. Then, as he furrowed up his deep, wrinkled brows,

[Old Man: Hm? Sure is Ken-bo's son alright.....but today's a Monday isn't it. Why're you still at the riverbanks with your dad?]

[Subaru: ——ke!]

Having been asked the question he most wanted to avoid, Subaru's expression stiffened painfully.

Then right after, the same sharp, piercing headache he experienced inside his room came. Involuntarily, in excruciating pain, he hugged his head and squeezed shut his eyes, wrenching out an [Excuse me!], he turned his back to the old man and ran.

[Dad: Ah, oy, hey, Subaru! Sorry, uncle-chan. I'll explain everything next time I see you]

[Old Man: Ah, oh-ooh..... maybe I said something I shouldn't have. Tell your son I'm sorry for me]

The words that followed behind him did not register in his ears at all.

In any case, Subaru was only trying to escape from the skull-crushing pain in his head, to escape somewhere where his heartbeat would settle, somewhere away from the embankments.

[Dad: There's nothing to apologize to him for. ——It's that guy's own problem anyway]

He quietly muttered under his breath.

[Dad: Here. Cool delicious cola filled with love. Shaken well for extra deliciousness..... or wanted to say that anyway, looks like that wasn't the right place for it though]

[Subaru:Love-filled scenes don't come out of vending machines. But thanks]

Receiving the can, and tasting its coolness within his palms, Subaru brought a finger to the pull-tab. Then, with some consideration, he closed his eyes, pointed the can away from anyone present, and pulled the tab with his finger—— when foam and liquid alike came exploding out of the opening with incredible force. Instantly the can in his hand lost a third of its weight.

[Dad: Oyoy, what's with that, fall for it damnit. I even especially said something about shaking it beforehand to give off the impression that I didn't shake it when in fact I did for a TWO-STEP-DECEPTION TECHNIQUE — you know]

[Subaru: I've already seen that pattern before, how many years have we known each other, dad. Knowing there's no way you wouldn't shake it is also a kind of trust in itself. Oh, hands're sticky]

Shaking off the overflowing cola that was spilling over his hands, Subaru lightly tilted the cola to his lips. The taste of expanding carbon passed through his mouth, splashing and quenching the thirst in the depths of his throat.

If only the sickness deep within his chest could be washed away as well, but unfortunately, the heaviness still remained there.

[Dad: So, have you settled down?]

[Subaru:Hard to say]

Answering the question, Subaru plopped himself down on the bench, and let out a long sigh as he dropped down his shoulders. Standing in front of Subaru, also delivering cola to his lips, Kenichi closed one of his eyes as if he was thinking about something.

After having ran away from the conversation on the embankment, Subaru and his father came to a children's playground not far from the river. Of course, there was no one here either, nor were there any fathers who suddenly got plunged into long summer vacations languishing on the swings or anything like that.

[Dad: In a way, I feel like even if I ride on the swings now I wouldn't be able to laugh like I used to. What would you do, Subaru. If dad took a ride on the swings on the way back from the convenience store]

[Subaru: I'd take a photo on my phone and spread it around on Twitter. The Tweet would be "My father has been released from gravity"]

[Dad: Oooh, Twitter. Dad's on Twitter too you know. I followed and got followed by too many people though, the screen's all a mess now]

Hearing him say this happily, Subaru sent Kenichi a side glance, before spilling out a languorous sigh as he searched for a topic. Anything, as long as it was something other than what happened on the riverbank—— if he went through that again, his skull would scream.

The shorter and shorter intervals in between the headaches worried him, but just like the way he'd react to his weakness, he could only repress and ignore the feeling as obstinately as he could.

[Subaru:It was just buying drinks from a vending machine, what took you so long?]

[Dad: Oh? Nothing really. There was just this highschool girl who skipped school hanging out in front of the vending machine. I gave her a lecture about getting back to school, bought her a drink, swapped email addresses, and sent her off]

[Subaru: I seriously can't believe how you can get a girl's email address that fast]

Getting a highschool girl's email as casually as going to the bathroom and back, he really had no words to describe that ability. Seeing Subaru like this, Kenichi tilted his head, [Really?]

[Dad: Email addresses, they just hand them right over don't they? The number of highschool girls in my contacts list must be in the 3 digits already]

[Subaru: Even if I add all my contacts together I don't know if it'll be in the double digits, and you have 3 digits just from highschool girls, do we have different definitions for the word "digits" here or something..... and dad, you didn't do anything inappropriate to any of the highschool girls that we'd end up seeing you on the news for, right?]

[Dad: What're you talking about, you]

Kenichi held up both hands at Subaru's suspicion, and shrugged up his shoulders to demonstrate his astonishment.

[Dad: It's not like I'd get any ideas about little brats like highschool girls. The target of my love has already been determined a long time ago, my sensual passions are reserved for my family alone!]

[Subaru: If you categorize it like that I'd be a target too!]

[Dad:Well, 'cause I love ya. We only get to live ONE-CHANCE, no?]

[Subaru: God no! What are you even saying!!]

“HA-HAHA”, Kenichi laughed as Subaru blurted this out.

Although the way he laughs was vulgar and hard on the ears, it did not give off a bad feeling. In fact, the same goes for anything Kenichi does.

His behaviors were unconventional, over-the-top, over-dramatic, the kind that makes people want to cringe, but everyone receives them favorably for some reason.

Today, walking with his father for the first time in a while, Subaru got a real sense of this. Just walking along the street, there had been more people stopping to chat with Kenichi than could be counted on a single hand. No matter where he went, there was someone to share old reminiscences with, and even if he had only just met the other person for the very first time, they would soon get along thick-as-thieves, thanks to his easy-going air. And he didn't hide any of it, either.

Throbbing, the pain returned to his temples, and Subaru's breathing grow ragged with every breath.

The intervals in between the scathing aches were no longer shrinking, instead, it was now arriving in fits.

As if the inside of his skull was being jabbed by needles, it was no longer something that could be cured by leaving it alone. But, it was not like the hospital would know what to do with it either.

Even if he didn't understand the reasons for his pain, he knew its cause.

What else could it be, except the emotions weighing upon his chest, and the choking, suffocating sensation accompanying it.

[Dad: You look ill, Subaru. Want me to piggyback you back to the house?]

[Subaru: I don't need to be piggybacked, or to go home..... it'd be the same even if I go back]

Rather, if he saw his mother Naoko at home, Subaru's condition would only grow worse. He was beginning to understand what that pain was, and what was making it worse. If what he imagined was correct, then when he does return Kenichi and Naoko again, the pain will rise to its extremes. In other words,

[Subaru: Finally, even my own body is giving me a lecture]

Endlessly running away from his guilt, perhaps his body was finally screaming back at him.

The terror of the time spent holding his knees inside his room, staring at the second-hand of the clock. The unrelenting anxiety and the acute, rending aches that lingered even after the threshold had passed.

The sickening malaise, like someone raving loudly in the interior of his skull, screaming accusations at what Subaru had become.

—*Who and where did you come from, and what do you know about me, anyway.*

[Dad: So um, Subaru. —Is there, a girl that you like?]

The silent Subaru was suddenly tossed this topic out of the blue.

It was the same question he had been asked in his room, the beginning of that same, unfunny joke. The first time, he had smiled wryly and refuted it, but now, this second time, somehow it was getting on his nerves.

Helped along by the merciless ache in his head, he irritably tried to return the same answer when——

{—Subaru}

Suddenly, from somewhere, he thought he heard a voice like a silver chime, sending his heart astir.

[Subaru: —?]

Lifting up his face, he searched for the source of the whisper. But even so, his eyes could not find the owner of the voice, and the only other person in the park besides Subaru, was Kenichi, standing in front of him.

Kenichi, seeing Subaru's sudden movement, also raised his brows in surprise,

[Dad: What is it? You look like you just heard a beautiful girl who's not there suddenly call your name]

[Subaru: Even if that's the case, I don't really have an answer to that..... Just now, did anyone call my name? Dad, you didn't learn to make your voice sound like beautiful girls while I wasn't looking, did you?]

[Dad: Your dad knows all kinds of little tricks, but not that one. OK, I'll start practicing it and show it off next time, I'll let you hear it in a month or so]

[Subaru: I'm not asking you to learn that..... Gees, what's with you]

Putting a stop to his father's words, Subaru looked away, and played back that voice he heard over and over again in his mind. The voice like a silver chime was gentle, yet its sound made Subaru heat up as it struck him, and in that instant, he was allowed to forget about the throbbing pain in his head.

From a place he did not know, came that voice of salvation——like the melodious song of a Goddess, it tended to Subaru's suffering, and calmed his expression a little, his breathing grew slightly more even.

[Dad: So uh, my question from before. Is there, a girl you like?]

[Subaru:what's gotten into you lately. What would you do with the answer anyway. Even if there is one and I tell you her name it's not like you'd know her]

[Dad: You never know, right? There's a chance I have the email address of the girl you like in my cell phone you know?]

[Subaru: If the girl I have a crush on gave her email address to my dad, even a love of a hundred years will grow cold]

Being tossed with that statement, Kenichi pouted up his lips with a [What's that supposed to mean]. Watching the gesture that really didn't suit a middle aged man, Subaru drank up the last of his cola,

[Subaru: You don't have to be so indirect about it, you know. Why not just ask me directly.Like, why don't I go to school]

[Dad: Well here I am trying to be considerate for once, you really are a kid who can't read the mood]

Smiling wryly at Subaru's words, Kenichi continued with [Well,]

[Dad: I did want to ask that, so you're not wrong about that]

[Subaru: I was thinking too.....I shouldn't be like this]

[Dad: Thinking isn't always necessary. The things that we think of are only empty ideas, and one way or another, there will always be something we couldn't think of, something we overlooked]

Seeing Subaru averting his eyes and making that quiet excuse, Kenichi drank up his cola as well, and sat down beside him. The wooden bench creaked, and a gust of wind flew past between them.

And so, they both looked on toward the same direction, neither seeing each other's faces.

[Dad: I don't really know what everyone else in the world believes, but I don't think school is everything. Mostly, because I'm saying that as someone who didn't really go to school seriously in the first place. I even skipped my own high school graduation ceremony you know, my sister had to bring me my graduation certificate back for me afterwards]

[Subaru: I heard that story so many times. Auntie who's 2 years younger than dad went to the same school, so when she graduated, they just gave dad's certificate to her as well. There're octopuses growing in my ears already][**Japanese expression that they've heard too much of the same thing, タコ, "Octopus" is a homonym of "Callus" in Japanese -TC*]

[Dad: Well you'll keep hearing it until you get cuttlefish. So, since I was like that, I think it's alright if you don't go to school if you don't want to. But, at my age, I do feel like I lost out on something by not going to school seriously, although it's not something you could understand yet]

Kenichi looked like he was staring into some far off place as he said this. Stealing a glance at the side of his serious expression, Subaru got the feeling that his father was really unfair, after all.

Usually only showing the side of him pretending to be an idiot, and then in a place like this, he suddenly makes you wonder where all that clowning had gone.

[Dad: It's alright though... isn't it? Nowadays people can live to about 80 years old on average. Out of 80 years, wasting one or two slacking around isn't that big of a deal. Getting back on track while you're young is easy too. Good thing my salary's still intact]

Circling his finger around, Kenichi made a dirty-looking smile.

Without looking at Subaru, who had not made a sound since he had begun, he crossed his arms and nodded his head,

[Dad: Being alive means that occasionally you'll get problems that you couldn't find the answers to. When I get problems like that, I'd run around like a headless chicken looking for a solution, but it's also possible to find answers by rolling around in a room, I guess. I

won't blame you while you're still contemplating. But if you're beginning to give up, then I'll say a thing or two]

[Subaru:Why]

[Dad: Hm?]

[Subaru: Why, did you suddenly feel like telling me all this today..... There's nothing different, it's not a special day or anything. Today's just, green-peas memorial day]

[Dad: There was a lot on that plate... huh]

In insides of his mouth that had just recently drank cola was quickly drying up.

Taking gasping breaths, Subaru anxiously waited for the answer to his question. Noticing Subaru's fretfulness from the side, Kenichi gave his neck a stretch with [Hm~~m],

[Dad: I wonder why. Maybe it was because I happened to have a day off, or because I inadvertently thought of it while doing my morning dry-towel rub-down, or because the horoscopes for Aquarius this morning said "PERFECTLY TUNED", or because the look on your face this morning seemed..... it's just a lil'bit, but it seemed like it had become better somehow]

[Subaru: My face, got better?]

[Dad: I'm talking about the look here. The face's still the same, it's still that scary-face with your mom's eyes and all]

Kenichi made a scary face by pulling up the corners of his eyes with his fingers, and then, saying [Not only that], he pointed the same fingers at Subaru,

[Dad: I don't know what happened, but you don't look like a guy who's been holed up in a room. Judging from what your mom said, you didn't go out yesterday either, so you should've been a guy who's been holed up in a room, right?]

[Subaru:Uh, I guess so. I've also been surfing in the grand ocean of the internet, though]

[Dad: If people can grow up that way, the number of lostlambgirl-chans coming to confide in me on Twitter should be decreasing instead of increasing.....]

[Subaru: So you've even been doing that kind of.....]

While astonished by the extent of his father's dealings, Subaru didn't want to let Kenichi get away from the main subject.

On the other hand, Subaru really had no idea what Kenichi meant by that.

The truth is, just as his mother provided in her testimony, yesterday's Subaru, same as the Subarus even earlier before that, only wasted his time in slothful indulgence.

In only the span of a single day, to say that all of a sudden today, the atmosphere about him changed...

[Subaru: Dad you must have gotten it wrong, or you just didn't properly look at me before]

[Dad: That last part really stung! You know I'm still using that "Lovely-Devil-Smile" picture of you when you were little as my cell phone screensaver right?]

[Subaru: The lovely part aside, the devil part makes me realize how scary-looking my eyes must have been even when I was little]

Either way, there was no doubt that Kenichi got it wrong.

Yesterday was still yesterday, today was still today. Subaru still spent his time without changing anything at all.

It would be alright to be like this, he thought, and he intended it to be this way. If he just continued on like this, surely, one day, Kenichi and Naoko would realize it as well.

——What Subaru really wanted, that is.

[Subaru: ——Dddagh!]

The moment he thought this, pain struck him again like fiery sparks scattering in front of his eyes.

A shock as if someone actually punched him, like his brain was protruding out of his skull, his cranium creaked and his eyes spun, and Subaru's seated body crumbled.

The pounding of his heart once again sped up like an alarm bell, and he could hear the sound of his pulse from the blood throbbing through in his ears. His eyes grew murky, the world turned into two, then three.

The sense of nausea surged up, and deep in his chest an incomprehensible heat source asserted its presence.

Each in their own ways they tormented his very existence, like seething accusations they shrieked and wailed.

[Dad: Oyoy, it looks really serious this time. Are you alright, Subaru?]

Unable to ignore the terrible condition he was in, Kenichi placed his hand on Subaru's shoulder with a worried look on his face. Sensing that touch, Subaru finally lifted up his face, as sweat was emerging on his forehead,

[Subaru: Aah.....no, it's alright. I was just a little, dizzy, that's all.....]

{—It's been rough, hasn't it}

[Subaru: —!?!]

Once again, every hair of Subaru's body stood on end as the voice like the sound of silver chimes rang upon his earlobes.

Kind and tender, the voice was filled with affection and concern. His tensed heart melted at the sound, and as it tended to his suffering, the pain, the creaking, the heat and thier chorus of screams subsided.

What was this voice. Why was the pain and agony retreating from it.

It felt, like a voice he knew. Like one he had been longing for. Yearning and yearning, pursuing and pursuing, clinging onto it, losing it, then regaining it once more——

{Thank you, Subaru}

[Subaru: You're.....]

The sight of her silver hair dancing in the wind branded itself into the back of his eyelids. The light of her amethyst eyes stared straight into Subaru's face, and every sound weaved from her lips filled him with love and longing.

{For helping me}

What's going on, what's going on, what's going on, what's going on, what's going on? Who is it, who is it, who is it, who is it, who is it, who is it, who is it, who is it, who is it? —Could she be the cause of his agony? His pain, torment, feelings so bitter that he wanted to puke, could they all be because of her?

{—Subaru}

He couldn't breathe. His throat is hot. Something was building up in the back of his eyes.

{It can't be helped, so}

The tips of his fingers trembled. There was no strength left in his legs. His throat cramped up as though his lungs were convulsing.

{Subaru always tries to cover it up like that}

Covering his face with his trembling hands, holding back the sobs from his clogged up throat, surging heat spilling from his eyes, Subaru——

{Why, did you help me?}

——The answer, was already in his heart.

The moment he saw it, all the unease swirling inside him vanished.

The creaking of his skull, the rising nausea, the dizziness turning the world vague, the frantic pounding of his heart, all came to a stop as if clearing the path for Natsuki Subaru.

Lifting up his face, he wiped away the tears that were about to fall.

Staring fixedly at his wetted sleeves, the only trace that remained of his tears, as if flinging it aside, he turned his wrist and held his hand tight into a fist. And,

[Subaru: Sorry I made you worry. I'm alright now]

[Dad: Really? Well it's good you calmed down, don't keep making people worry, gees]

[Subaru: En, my bad. So um, about the question you asked earlier]

Releasing his father's hand on his shoulder, Subaru turned to face him.

Sitting side-by-side on the bench, Subaru looked straight into his father's face. Come to think of it, after all their conversations today, this was the first time he truly looked at his father's face, he thought.

Running away even in place like this, he couldn't help but smile wryly at his own weakness inside his heart. Then, turning to his father, who now had a question mark above his head, Subaru,

[Subaru: ——There is, someone I like. So, I'm already alright now]

Sketching out the face that was burned into the back of his eyelids, Natsuki Subaru's resolve to face his past was sealed.

Chapter 18 [Parent And Child]

——He felt his head clearing up.

The chorus of agony up to now that had been ripping him apart subsided, and now, there was only one thing on Subaru's mind——the resolve to face his father in front of him.

[Subaru: I do. Have someone I like]

Once more, he repeated his answer to that question.

Putting it to his lips again, Subaru felt his heart beginning to walk forward.

In front of his eyes, hearing that confession, Kenichi blinked several times before noticing how abrupt that statement sounded,

[Dad:Is that so]

Speaking in a quiet voice, he listened to Subaru's words.

That attitude was like a salvation. There were people who were willing to listen, Subaru must have already known this, yet he had only ever kept it to himself.

Now, he intended to bring an end to it.

——Because there is someone behind me, pushing me on.

[Subaru: That's right. I am not the child who only curls up in a room anymore]

He didn't know exactly how much he had changed.

The no longer a child part might be stretching it a bit, for he was still aware of how childish he was.

The courage to hold his head high, the resolve to face his weakness, the determination to no longer run from unpleasant situations, it seemed he hadn't acquired any of it, after all.

He was simply someone worse than a child, finally admitting that he was a child.

And even that, he couldn't have realized by himself.

The silver visage that appeared within his mind, sent a sweetness into Subaru's heart. It was a radiance that brought warmth to the stagnating Subaru, who had long been frozen in place.

Silver——was supposed to be a color of coldness, but to Subaru now, it was a source of endless warmth and the strength to march forward. As though mesmerized by this heat,

[Subaru: What was I so afraid of, that I had to curl up like a ball, I remember all of it now. ——No, I already knew long ago. I knew, but I pretended not to see it.....The weakness that I thought only I would notice, while I pretended not to see them, there were those who.....]

Who nothing could have gotten past. He knew who they were.

[Subaru: Mom, and dad, I wished you would've beaten me]

[Dad: ————]

[Subaru: I was such a hopeless, little, useless idiot, self-conceited piece of trash, I wished you two would just beat me.....and give up on me]

Silently staring at Subaru, Kenichi's eyes did not move.

Subaru saw his own reflection inside those pupils that were the same color as his own. The sharp corners of his own eyes that were often mistaken for a sign of displeasure, for some reason, were now feeble, and drooping.

——How pathetic, he thought.

[Subaru: When I was little I was clever, and I could find a perfect solution to anything. Running too, and same with studying.....the things my friends around me couldn't do, I could figure out almost immediately, and I was even mystified by why everyone else had so much trouble]

Perhaps it was childish conceit, or one could call it an adorable sense of omnipotence. When Subaru was little, his athletics and learning were all ahead of other children his age. He could run faster than those around him, he was smarter than those the same age as him, and as if it were only natural, he was at the center of everything——

{He's that guy's child, after all}

Everyone gave Subaru this appraisal, adults and neighbors alike often kept it on their tongues.

He knew, by “that guy”, they meant his father, and the fact that he was his father’s son was recognized by people all around. ——And the young Subaru took pride in those words.

Dad——Subaru’s father, Natsuki Kenichi, in his son’s eyes he was a person full of charisma and allure.

He laughed well, talked well, cried well, angered well, exercised well, worked well.

His father could announce his love for Subaru and his mother in public without feeling the slightest embarrassment, everywhere his father was surrounded by people who admired him, and he always saw his father standing in the center of a crowd of smiling faces.

To Subaru, such a father was more than anything he could have hoped for, to have such a father who cherished his family, Subaru and his mother, above all the world, instilled him with a sense of superiority to the point of exuberant pride.

——I want to become like father. I want to become like father.

For the young Subaru, the expanse of his father’s back was the expanse of the world itself, and the world was only something to be seen from on top of his father’s back.

And so every day, Subaru spent in happiness, and in search of happiness.

But,

[Subaru: When did it start I wonder..... I don’t remember, but one day I lost a race, I think. Soon, I was no longer the first at everything. There were now guys who could run faster than me, guys who can solve problems faster than I can. Little by little, my first-places grew fewer and fewer, and it felt strange, I thought]

Once it had started it only grew worse, and the shining stars within Subaru's heart gradually left him.

Even if he stretched out his hand, running here and there under the sky, the stars that once shined all around him were nowhere to be found. There was only the silence of the coming, enshrouding darkness.

And in that elusive, uncertain anxiety,

{He's that guy's child, after all}

Those words became Subaru's salvation, the last hope he could hold onto.

Even if he was not the fastest or the smartest, those words continued holding up the young Subaru's confidence.

Rather than training to run faster, or devoting all his efforts to his schoolwork, he decided first and foremost to do stupid things.

Sneaking into school at night with his friends, drawing over the white lines all over town, chasing away notoriously dangerous stray dogs from their hangout spots—all so people would not grow tired of him, so he could protect the last of his dwindling stars.

[Subaru: "Studying hard is stupid. Being able to run fast is nothing to be proud of. The things I was doing were making people happy, and that's far more, far better than what anyone else could do"]

In order to sustain this mistaken Pride, he had no choice but to keep going.

He will take the lead to do what others are afraid to do, challenge what others loathe to challenge, this way, he would make sure he did not lose his carefully protected place in the world.

[Subaru: But, if I were to protect myself this way, the next time I'd have no choice but to do something even bigger. It can't be less than what I had done before. They'd think I was someone small if I did, and I couldn't let that happen]

So Subaru's actions could only become more and more extreme.

If anyone asked why he would do such things, "he's Natsuki Subaru" would be the answer.

——Yes, it could only be Natsuki Subaru.

Natsuki Subaru was braver than anyone else, wilder than anyone else, freer than anyone else, so he must continue to be the existence that everyone else longed to be.

Straining himself, stretching himself thin, he tried to hide his nervousness, so that not even he himself would have noticed it, he continued fooling himself and those around him that he could do much, much more.

Because he was Natsuki Kenichi's son, Natsuki Subaru.

[Subaru: I thought I could do anything. I made myself believe that I would do anything. And without ever bothering to think beforehand, everything I did, and every consequence of what I did became a stupid mess.....]

Like a moth circling toward a flame, he singlemindedly pursued the heat without even noticing if he had caught fire.

If he really was a moth, becoming enchanted by a flame would have been the end of him. But Subaru was not a moth, nor were the friends who surrounded him. They were only human, even more so than Subaru.

——It appeared nothing in particular had set it off.

Attracted by the mischief Subaru proclaimed, similarly scary-faced kids came gathering around him.

And like teeth breaking off of a comb, the number of companions around him began to drop.

[Subaru: A bunch of idiots, I thought. You won't find this kind of fun anywhere except sticking by my side. Those guys will regret it, but they're free to waste their boring time elsewhere. My sights are on something higher]

If he continued searching like this for the whereabouts of those stars, at least he won't lose sight of the star above his head.

Of the sea of stars that once should have painted all the sky, now, only one lone, sparkling star remained to Subaru, and so he walked on and on without letting it out of his sight——until suddenly, when he turned his eyes from the star-lit sky back to the ground, [Subaru: There was already no one else around me]

Of course this happened.

Without minding his surroundings, continually chasing after stars that no one else could see.

His companions, who at first found it amusing, seeing the ever escalating wildness with no landing point in sight, could no longer follow him.

Paying no mind to this, only mocking at those who left as idiots, even those who remained grew uneasy and doubtful.

One, and then another, his friends disappeared from his side, until he noticed he was all alone under the starlit sky.

Feeling angry, sulking, wanting to forget, he gazed up at the sky——

[Subaru: Even the radiant star that should have been above me is nowhere to be found anymore]

When he lost sight of the light of that star, deserted by the friends around him, left alone in the dark of night, Subaru finally noticed it.

——I was never anyone special.

{He's that guy's child, after all}

They were the magical words which the young Subaru once embraced with pride, and once would have injected Subaru's heart full of vitality.

Since when, he did not know, they had turned into a curse.

[Subaru: Just going outside, wandering around town, it'll be obvious. No matter where I go, where I look, I'd find lingering traces dad left behind.....it's only natural, I guess]

Subaru's small and narrow world was precisely the same as the view from on top of his father's back.

To Subaru, who aspired to reach the same heights as his father, no matter where he is, no matter where he looked in that narrow world, there was not a single place where he could not sense his father's lingering scents.

Gradually, for Subaru, the world turned into a terrifying place.

At the same time, eating away at Subaru's heart, was the painful self-awareness that he was only ordinary, and the sense of shame that made him want to hide that ordinariness from his parents and anyone who knew them.

Loved by everyone, relied upon by everyone, smiled at by everyone.

Yet that same Natsuki Kenichi's son, Natsuki Subaru, was shriveling up squeamishly under everyone's gazes, a sickly coward hugging his own head frightened by the vastness of the world, he could not bear to be thought of this way.

His own shortcomings must be nothing less than a humiliation for his father who proclaimed to love him, and perhaps, at some point, even that towering father would grow disappointed in him. That, above all, was what terrified Subaru the most.

In elementary and in middle school, Subaru single-mindedly made an effort to avoid drawing any attention to himself.

The classmates who had known him since the lower grades couldn't wrap their heads around how docile Subaru had become——the children, at their impressionable age, failed to notice even a fragment of the darkness residing in their classmate's heart, and as they each went about their lively days, they soon forgot about such trivial things.

Meanwhile, as he spent this time burying himself in anonymity, as he worked to cast off the shadows of his past, at home, Subaru skillfully continued to play the part of the unruly child.

At school almost as meek as a weed in the shade, as soon as he was home he would return to the wildness of his youth like he was a completely different person.

Coming home from school, with various accounts of his feats of heroism, he would soften the corners of his mother's lips in midst of her housework, and put a smile on his father's face when he returned exhausted from his work.

——All of these, had his parent noticed that they were lies? Even now, Subaru couldn't be certain.

This way, throughout elementary and middle school, he spent the greater part of his life on painting and fortifying these lies, and constructing the fictional character of Natsuki Subaru.

Everyone had forgotten the various mischiefs of Subaru's past, and knew him merely as an inconspicuous classmate whom they barely knew anything about beyond his name. On top of the tinge of loneliness that accompanied this barren relationship with his peers, covering over Subaru heart was an even more intimate sense of dread. For to bear the surname, Natsuki, was to be constantly in awe of a certain force.

[Subaru: Now that I think about it, it really was a dark way to live. But doing this, I passed through elementary and middle school. Then putting that behind me, I became a high school student.....even though it's a local school, probably because of the adjusted standard deviation score, almost none of my classmates got into the same one.....]

Having gotten into the habit of thinking only of retreating, with the sudden, drastic change of environment Subaru seized at his opportunity to move forward, and assembled together every fragment of courage that still remained in him.

Wrenching out the last bit of that courage, Subaru clenched his teeth and held up his head.

Advancing into the brand new environment of high school. Building unknown relationships with unfamiliar faces.

There, even if they judged him as Natsuki Subaru, no one would see him as "Natsuki

Kenichi's son". In fact, in that place——he might even see the light of that starry sky he had lost, once more.

But the way he used that courage, decisively threw Subaru stumbling off that path.

[Subaru: Even I have to admit, that was one magnificent failure of a high school debut. But of course it was. You have a guy who hadn't built any interpersonal relationships all throughout elementary and middle school, thrown into a place full of faces he doesn't know, breathing roughly through his nose unable to shake off his tension.....even an idiot could see how that'd turn out]

Unable to see something even an idiot could see, thinking about it now, Subaru realized he must have been even worse than an idiot.

Without going into too much detail, the result was already easy to imagine.

In terms of building interpersonal relationships, Subaru had no other role model except his father, so when the time came to build new relationships in an entirely new environment, his only frame of reference was his father.

——But the kind of jokes that might get him a smile or two while they were still children, when used on classmates in the middle of the psychological changes of the latter stages of puberty, became nothing short of toxic.

[Subaru: Poisonously toxic. Deadly toxic. I was like the kind of poisonous mushrooms with the little red and white dots on it, the ones that have "Highly toxic, you'll die horribly if you eat it" written all over it kind of guy]

How is a guy like that supposed to fit in anywhere.

Setting out into a brand new environment, Subaru lost his footing on the very first step and fell straight to the bottom of the pit. Then, spending his time alone, becoming firmly established as that awkward, socially dense guy who can't read the mood, he suddenly thought one morning,

——Ah, I don't want to go to school today.

[Subaru: I remember that morning both mom and dad were out of the house. It felt like too much of a bother to get out of bed, so I slept way past the time when I should have gotten up.....and when I finally rushed myself out of bed, panicking, it was already noon, but when I was about get up and change]

Subaru noticed his heart, and his body, were awfully calm.

At school, while sitting alone in a seat by the window, pretending to be asleep, silently letting the time drift by, Subaru's heart had always been tormented by anxiety and fear. Not wanting to be in this place, from the moment he set foot in school he would start thinking about going back home. No, even from the moment he woke up, he would start spending his time thinking about when he'd finally return from school.

It was not that he was bullied. It was not that he was being shunned.

Only, Subaru himself had constructed a wall. He was afraid of embracing the hope of touching another's kindness. And the thought of perhaps seeing the light of those stars again, filled him with unease.

If only he could pass a day without having to endure the agony of those hours. That sense of liberation, that sense of relief, drawn by the allure of that sense of powerlessness, little by little, Subaru's steps drifted further and further away from school.

[Subaru: Skipping once a week became once every three days, then it's just every other day.....until I stopped going altogether, even two months in a row]

There is no need to talk about the days that came after that.

No longer going to school, Subaru's heart was filled with a sense of relief. It was a sense of liberation at being far away from the school where he had been forced to spend those agonizing hours, and, above all, now ruling over Subaru's heart was a kind of acceptance, and surrender.

For no great reason, he had become the conceited, self-satisfied drop-out, Subaru.

Looking at this Subaru, no one would be thinking "He's that guy's child, after all" anymore,

and above all——how disappointed his parents must be to see such a pathetic Subaru.

Surely, then, even mom and dad would give up on “Loving” that Subaru.

If a son they had no love for was being considered trash, it probably wouldn’t mean anything to them.

But if a son they loved was being labeled as worthless, those two would surely feel angry. And saddened, too. If people saw them like that, they would pity them, even look down on them.

It would be better if Subaru had simply faded out of their lives.

Therefore, Natsuki Subaru——

[Subaru: “I don’t love you.” “I disown you.” “You are not.....my son.” I wished, you’d just say that to me, and throw me away. I wished, you’d give up on me]

Half-expecting to see the stars that could no longer exist, faintly hoping, he gazed up at the sky.

The effeminate, pathetic Subaru, the stupid creature that did not deserve to be Natsuki Kenichi’s son, only wished to be set free.

——Even Subaru himself had not realized that this was the true content of his heart.

Facing his heart, exposing its interiors, for the first time, Subaru saw the ugliness of his own heart. The thought of himself, stupid and weak, unwilling to admit his faults and averting his eyes, then trying to push it all onto someone else to clean up his mess, it made him want to vomit.

Yet, in the end, the reason Subaru did not abandon himself, was because he was lent a hand by someone who would not abandon him.

{Rem, loves Subaru-kun}

Overlapping with the silver outlines in the back of his eyelids, was now an ethereal pale-blue radiance.

Like a soothing wind it blew into Subaru’s heart, sending a consoling warmth through Subaru’s frozen limbs.

{Let us start from here. From square one.....no, from Zero!}

When Subaru was supposed to have come to an end, the girl, saying this, gave his back a push.

When Subaru could no longer go on, she lifted up his face, took his hand, wrapped her arm around his back, and gave his forehead a kiss, and bestowed him with courage. Charmed forth by the silver radiance granting him heat, and pushed from behind him by the sky-blue warmth prompting him to walk forward, Natsuki Subaru, whose story was supposed to have come to an end, once again started off from Zero.

Because he realized this, because he remembered this, because he had decided to march forth from Zero——before Zero, he must now resolve the Minus of his past.

As Subaru's long monologue came to an end, Kenichi, listening, closed his eyes as if lost in thought and fell completely silent. Seeing his father like this, Subaru tried desperately to seal in the weakness and cowardice from leaking from his throat.

Having been granted a chance to reflect, through that small change in his mental state, however little it may have been, he saw the grotesqueness of his own heart.

Whether it was now, or before, Subaru had always pushed the consequences of his actions onto others to clean up.

Because he lacked the courage to give up on himself, and because he wanted to be the tragic hero rather than the villain of his own world, without saying a word, he had silently waited for someone else to volunteer to be the villain.

He thought that if he stopped going to school, if he passed his days in slothfulness inside his room, if he continued on being his foolish self——one day Kenichi will kick down the door, and put an end to Subaru's world.

Unconsciously, in the deepest depth of his heart, he looked forward to such an ending to his slothful days.

It was while his mind was trapped in this deadlock, that he came to the Parallel World.

Then even there, Subaru continued to exhibit his complacency, until——

[Dad: ——Subaru]

Kenichi, who had been deep in thought, opened his eyes, and called to Subaru's name. The sound of that call pulled Subaru's consciousness back from the sea of contemplation and tossed it back into the reality before him——his father's face, directly in front of his eyes, and,

[Dad: FATHER—HEADBUTT!]

[Subaru: Adaghh!?!]

His forehead struck by a terrible impact, Subaru yelped as sparks flew scattering all over. Holding his forehead under the devastating pain, he found Kenichi standing in front of the bench, looking down at him.

[Dad: See, Subaru. That was my love-filled FATHER HEADBUTT, a single-blow of fury]

[Subaru: You called a headbutt and then switched to an axe-kick! You even put your face up close for a masterful feint!!]

[Dad: That trick only worked 'cause you were seated and I was standing! Eech, my body's grown stiffer. Nothing like what it used to be. That's what I get for slacking on my after-shower stretches]

With a weird look on his face, Kenichi started doing some stretching routines. Watching his father while giving the part of his head that took the impact a rub, half crying from the pain, Subaru wasn't sure what to do with this completely unexpected reaction. Whatever Subaru did expect, at least it wasn't this,

[Dad: But, Subaru. You know, you.....you really are a blockhead]

[Subaru: Uuoogh hh]

That unsugarcoated remark cracked him in two, and Subaru couldn't help but make a gurgling sound with his throat.

Looking down at Subaru, Kenichi crossed his arms with a snort,

[Dad: Going all “nieh-nieh-nieh-nieh” and worried about everything..... Which part of me and mom did you get that kind of self-pity from? You’re totally taking after your mom’s younger brother, you know. The short, fat bald one with that face that looks like he’s always worried about something]

[Subaru: Well that’s just going too far.....although yes, that uncle was definitely the reason I made it my life goal not to end up fat and bald when I grow up]

The father and son at least agreed on unreservedly burning that uncle who had absolutely anything to do with this.

While somewhere far away, under the same sky, their unsuspecting relation was given this scathing review, Kenichi continued with an aggravated look [To begin with,]

[Dad: There were all sorts of things that pissed me off, but there was one thing most of all. It just pisses me off that you thought by taking that passive attitude you can get me to stop loving you. With that shut-in-drop-out-apathy-syndrome, you think your own father is just going to go berserk and rip you a new one?What are you, stupid? You want me to scold you? Are you a little girl who didn’t get enough physical intimacy when you were little? Wasn’t all that wrestling I do with you every morning enough?]

[Subaru: The way you said that was misleading in a few places but the gist of it was right so I can’t really refute it.....]

[Dad: No, if you want me to give up on you, you’ll have to do a lot better than that. Who’s going to give up on a child who’s shutting himself up in a cask? If you want me to hate you, you better go murder half of humanity or something. Then I’ll hate ya]

[Subaru: We don’t even see that kind of villain in Shounen Mangas anymore! Who’s gonna go and do something that absurd!?]

[Dad: ——Well what you said to me was just as absurd wasn’t it]

Hearing him say this out loud, Subaru was at a loss for words.

In front of him, Kenichi bent down his waist and met Subaru's eyes, [We clear?] he asked, [Dad: Even if you are slow as a snail, too dumb to remember the multiplication tables, or go bragging on self-harm blogs to get attention.....]

[Subaru: I'm not that slow or dumb or stupid.....]

[Dad: Even if you are that slow and dumb and stupid, I'm not going to hate you or give up on you. Isn't that obvious? I am your dad, and you are my son]

With an exasperated sigh at the end of those words, Kenichi straightened up his back. Subaru looked up, at his father standing tall. Bathed in his son's gaze, Kenichi said,

[Dad: Still, just what kind of superman did you take me for. From what you said, it's as if I'm some SUPER transcendent-technology PERFECT-flawless-HITECH-superhero, you know]

[Subaru: That's interpreting it too much]

[Dad: You just don't know it, but I have all kinds of troubles, regrets, and failures too, I also cry and shout and get rejected.....yeah, I'm nothing special at all. At least I got a nice-looking face, though. Not like you]

[Subaru: Overconfidence strike-two]

[Dad: When I was your age I wasn't all that mature either. Sure I got a little famous, but it was nothing particularly special. I could stop time a little, kinda, but that was it]

[Subaru: Should've used that when you got hit by a car last year]

Three-part joke. (**Two mundane statements followed by a punchline. Or could also refer to three jokes told in succession. In Manzai comedy, the "straight-man" objects to the "funnyman"'s statements – TC*)

The three straight-man rallies perfectly exchanged, Kenichi held out his palm for a high-five. But, just as their palms came into contact, one hand grabbed the other,
[Dad: Now let me twist the wrist of that dumbass blockhead pain-in-the-ass son of mine to straighten out his character a bit.....]

[Subaru: Ow! OwOW! Wa-wait, my wrist is gonna.....Owwwhurts!]

[Dad: ——But I kinda get the feeling that won't be necessary, you already look pretty beaten-up as it is]

His twisted wrist being released, Subaru stood up giving his hand a shake while whining about the pain. Staring at Subaru with one eye closed, Kenichi made a small snort with his nose,

[Dad: I got that feeling this morning, but just now it's like something suddenly changed about you again. What's with that]

[Subaru: I told you, didn't I. It's, because I have someone I like]

A silver brightness, was leading Natsuki Subaru by the hand.

[Subaru: And there's also, someone who told me they loved me, even in spite of what I am]

A warm, sky-blue radiance, was tenderly pushing on Natsuki Subaru's back.

[Subaru: They, don't know I am Natsuki Kenichi's son. When I am with them, I am only Natsuki Subaru.....No,]

Shaking his head, he fixed his eyes on his father standing in front of him,

[Subaru: No matter who I am in front of, I am always Natsuki Subaru. I brought it on myself to carry that strange signboard on my back, when I was actually being crushed by a weight that was never there. I finally understand it, now]

[Dad: Well that was super late. I'm the big black pillar holding this family up, here. I never asked you to be the head of the family, who gave you the idea to carry a burden like that. I should smack ya]

[Subaru: You did plenty of stuff more painful than smacking already!]

Seeing Subaru stomping on the ground in protest of the previous attacks, Kenichi laughed [My bad my bad] like he was apologizing on someone else's behalf. Then, squinting his eyes into thin lines, Kenichi continued [Compared to that,]

[Dad: You said there was someone you like, and then you said there's someone who likes you, but, what? You... are you a two-timer? With only a Subaru-rank?]

[Subaru: Don't call it a Subaru-rank! Although I totally realize it's too luxurious for my level! But so what! There can be two stars in the highest place, what's wrong with that!]

It was not just him being defiant, for those were Subaru's honest feelings at that moment. He loved Emilia. And he loved Rem. Those two made Subaru stand up and walk forward, whether it was to stand in front of Kenichi or to face the self of his past, they gave him the strength to not run away.

All the sea of stars that once covered over Subaru's sky—all the glittering starlight he once saw gazing upwards.

Overhead now, blinding, brighter than the light of all those stars combined, was the star of those two's radiance. And all around that brightest star, even the stars that should have vanished long ago now came to glow with a different light.

It was outside of his shut-in room, inadvertently summoned to the Parallel World, through desperation, suffering, sorrow, wailing as he cried, screaming in anger, charging in with a smile on his face, enthusiastically advancing forward, that Subaru won this starlit sky.

[Dad: Well, that's alright. Do as you like. Long as you get a perfect ending out of it without breaking the law, I won't have any objections. Looks like, you got some talent for duping girls too, huh]

[Subaru: If I had talents like that I wouldn't have failed so miserably on my first day of highschool and ended up all alone. I can't pull off miracles like you, dad]

[Dad: I don't think that's true, you know? You're my son, after all. And although you got all sorts of things wrong, that's the one thing you got most wrong]

[Subaru: That one?]

Tapping the fingers on his cross arms, Kenichi answered the confused looking Subaru with an [En], nodding,

[Dad: I may be hyperactive in front of you and mom, but dad knows how to sort out the TIME-PLACE-OCCASION for these thing, you know? I was always like this in front of you, so maybe you got the wrong idea, but if you act like dad in front of everyone, ofcourse things are gonna go pear-shaped, oy]

[Subaru: Wa, wai-wait.....]

[Dad: It's obvious, isn't it? If you see a guy with this kind of TENSION on the first meeting, you'll be scared to even come near him, right? From there until you become good friends, you still have to straighten up your collar. You only get to take off a button on your shirt when it's hot out. Otherwise, it's patience from April to June]

That was the shocking truth. In reality, even his father changes his attitude depending on the target, just like a normal person.

Without knowing this, he had believed that if he only acted like his father, he would be loved by those around him just like his father was. Such was the shallowness of his mind.

[Subaru: All that time I spent stagnant.....]

[Dad: Well, it wasn't all useless, I think. In fact, you got to become who you are now because of it. Those stars you found, aren't they worth the time you spent looking for them?]

Subaru, hugging his head in regret, lifted up his face as he heard those words. He could answer that question without a moment's hesitation, for he already knew the answer, beyond all doubt.

[Subaru: ——No, it was worth it. No matter how many chances I get, I would want to chase after the same stars as I am now. So, I think I like the way I am now]

[Dad: Is that so.....Then, that was all great, wasn't it?]

Relieved to see Subaru resolve this in his heart, Kenichi smiled.

And facing that smile, Subaru felt the heavy lump in his chest dropping with a thud. The darkness within him cleared, as if all the feelings of gloom had been washed away.

Although it was a selfish and conceited emotion, to Subaru right now, it was salvation.

After facing his past, saying goodbye to his old self while embracing and accepting all that he had been, he was proud of this present self that was now walking forward.

And so——

[Subaru: I'm sorry, for all the times I closed myself off. I'm sorry I made you worry with all the emotion I can't sort out and refusing to go to school. I know I was wrong now. I'm really sorry]

[Dad: It's ok, you don't have to. It's my fault for not realizing how amazingly awesome you imagined me to be. I should be the one to say sorry, for being way too awesome in your eyes!]

[Subaru: Even though it's a fact, after you put it like that I totally don't want to admit it now!]

[Dad: Hahaha, no need to be embarrassed. You're my son, and you have my blood in your veins. You definitely have the potential to become someone half as awesome as me]

[Subaru: Only half? I thought new generations are supposed to overtake the old ones]

[Dad: Well you also got half of you from your mom. With my awesomeness and good looks, combined with the other part from your mom, they kinda canceled each other out, you know]

[Subaru: Sorry mom, I have no counter to that!]

Unable to say anything to exonerate his mom who wasn't there, Subaru clapped his hands together and apologized to thin air. Amused to see this gesture from him, Kenichi shook his head,

[Dad: Well then, that's a load off your shoulders, right? All the walking-in-place from before is already done, there's no point dwelling on them anymore, all that matters now is what you do from now on]

[Subaru: Yeah, en. I'm, sorry I made you worry.....]

[Dad: If you want to apologize for something like that, you should take the time to properly repay our kindness. One day, you'll have to take good care of me and mom you know, my eldest son]

——As he heard those words, Subaru grew still.

[Subaru: ————]

He had made up his mind to apologize for everything that had happened before, and he was determined to confess all the feelings of his present self.

He had accomplished it well, the years of accumulated barriers between them had melted,

and he could now face his parents with a clear heart.

Everything he had wanted to say up to now——

[Subaru: ——Fr]

Then —— the moment he was about to say “From now on”, what surged up instead through Subaru’s entire body was,

[Subaru:Ple... please forgive me]

[Dad: Subaru?]

[Subaru: I’m so.....I’m sorry, I’m so sorry..... I’m, I’m sorry I’m sorry.....I’m so sorry.....]

The confused Kenichi’s voice came from in front of him. Yet Subaru could no longer make out his face.

The flood of overflowing tears had blocked up Subaru’s vision, and the shapes of the world grew blurred. Covering his face with his palms, he desperately tried to wipe away the stream of tears. But even wiping, and wiping, he could not stop the tears from flowing. They cannot be stopped, and would not be stopped.

[Subaru: Forgive me please forgive me.....I, I’m.....There’s only, you two.....I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.....]

——He had realized it.

Somewhere within his heart, Subaru had realized it long ago.

From the moment he was summoned to this Parallel World, bathed under the light of the sun, when he squinted his eyes within the blinding flash of that instant, as if it were a revelation, Subaru knew.

——That he would never return to his original world again.

Having spilled his heart to his father, having confessed the dark emotions that had accumulated inside his chest, having been granted forgiveness, having been lent the strength to walk forward, having been taught and brought up to know how,

[Subaru: Despite all of that, I..... I can't repay you anything..... I will, never get to see you again..... I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry.....I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry]

The tears would not stop. He was about to fall to his knees.

But even so, Subaru remained standing, because stopping him from collapsing, was a hug from in front that wrapped the crying Subaru's body within its arms.

The palms were strong and broad, they pressed his son, who was almost as tall as he was, tightly into him, yet, like consoling a weeping child, they patted and caressed his back.

[Dad: ——No matter where or when, you're still a pain-in-the-ass son. Geez]

As he said this, he continued holding onto the sobbing Subaru, soothingly, and lovingly, and did not let go.

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[Dad: Have you calmed down?]

[Subaru: ——Yeah. Sorry. That must be, really annoying]

[Dad: No kidding. Just look at my shirt. I've got dried out tears and snot all over my chest now. I'm too embarrassed to even wander around the neighborhood like this]

“Haha”, using his fingers to give Subaru, who had stopped crying, a flick to the forehead, Kenichi let out a vulgar laugh.

With a grin, he stared at Subaru's face, that was now swollen from the tears. Seeing those eyes filled with sadness and apology, Kenichi sighed,

[Dad: I don't know why you cried so hard, but that must have been kinda embarrassing for ya, so I'll keep it a secret. Try to thank me as best you can, ok?]

[Subaru:Aah. Thank you. Truly, from the bottom of my heart, more than anyone else in the world]

[Dad: Well I'm gonna blush if you put it like that]

Scratching his face looking embarrassed, Kenichi chuckled. Unable to stare at his father's face directly for too long, Subaru averted his eyes.

Kenichi shrugged his shoulders, and flapped his hands around like he was trying to drive away insects,

[Dad: Gees, now get yourself back home, you crybaby. Dad's in the mood for walking around a bit more, so I'll take the long way back. If I'm seen with ya while you're sobbing, people are gonna think something strange]

[Subaru:They'll wonder what on earth a pair of father and son our age could be doing together, huh]

[Dad: Yeah no kidding. If I go back with you like this, my friends are gonna hear about it and embarrass me with it, you know]

[Subaru: That line could be fatal depending on who you say it to, so be careful how you use it!]

Inadvertently blurting out another straight-man counter to his father's words, Subaru's heart was stabbed with the pain of nostalgia. Clenching his teeth and forcing himself to turn his face away, Subaru managed to spit out the words [So uh],

[Subaru: I'll be going on ahead, then. Try not to get questioned by the police or anything]

[Dad: Sorry to disappoint ya, but all the police officers around here know me. If they come and say hello I can't really ignore them, can I]

[Subaru: Just please don't do anything except say hello back]

That attitude from Kenichi hadn't changed at all. Once again feeling saved by it, Subaru felt disgusted by how his own powerlessness was still no better than before. No matter where he was, he still had to rely on others to protect him. He was so hopeless that way.

But more than anything, he didn't want to show his weakness in front of Kenichi anymore. So after exhaling a sharp breath, as if he had made up his mind, Subaru turned his back to his father and swung out his step. And with hurried steps, he tried to disappear from that place as quickly as he could.

[Dad: ——Hey, Subaru]

From behind, Kenichi's voice called to him, and his legs inadvertently stopped moving.

[Dad: You're, going through all sorts of things too, huh. So, I just say this one thing]

[Subaru: ————]

[Dad: Give it your best. I'm counting on you, son]

The fear of being counted on, the fear of disappointing.

The worry that he would betray his father's expectations had grasped Subaru for so long, refusing to let go. It was because of it, that to Subaru, his father's expectations had turned into a symbol of fear——

[Subaru: ——Yeah, leave it to me. Dad]

Still with his back turned, Subaru stuck a finger toward the sky, and,

[Subaru: My name is Natsuki Subaru. Son of Natsuki Kenichi. ——Therefore I can accomplish anything, and will do anything it takes. Your son is really awesome, you know]

[Dad: Yeah, I know. Half of you came from me, after all!]

“HAHAHA”, at the end of those words Kenichi showered a volley of laughter upon Subaru's back.

Listening to its sound, a smile came onto Subaru's lips.

With his back to his father, he swung out his strides.

His knees were no longer shaking. His heart no longer wavered. He only stared straight ahead as he walked.

——The one whose back he had always watched from behind, will be watching him from behind from now on.

Amazed, by how much strength he could draw from a fact as simple as this.

Subaru continued walking, without stopping.

Chapter 19 [Homework]

—After saying goodbye to his father, Subaru, while reorganizing the thoughts in his mind, slowly made his way through the familiar townscape, on the road leading to home.

As he walked on, a myriad of emotions had been surging through his heart.

He hadn't taken a stroll in the sun at an hour like this ever since he stopped going to school, but the feeling of sunlight on his skin was probably not the only reason why the scenery he had walked through so many times before felt different this time.

[Subaru: Well, a kid who's skipping school can't really go shamelessly prancing around under Mr.Sun-sama, after all]

It wouldn't be good if word got around the neighborhood, or if he wound up getting lectured by a police officer.

Even if Subaru had subconsciously wanted his father and mother to hate him, he wasn't exactly planning to pull the police into it.

The streets around his home were full of memories.

As if soaking it all in, and confirming it with the soles of his feet, passing through the quiet—— or rather, completely unpopulated residential streets, by the time he no longer noticed the sensation of dried up tears on his cheeks, he had arrived at the front door of his house.

Taking in a deep breath, he halted.

Closing his eyes, going through the multitude of emotions in his heart, and gulping them all down,

[Subaru: ——I'm home]

Opening the door, he sent these words into the house.

Feeling a bit nervous, he waited for the reply. But the response that should have greeted him still didn't come. Sensing something strange and furrowing his brows, Subaru took off

his shoes and stepped into the house. Then, looking around for his mother who should be home,

[Subaru:Ohaiy-]

——In front of the refrigerator, looking back at him, his mother was holding a bottle of mayonnaise in her mouth.

[Subaru:I'm back]

All the tenseness up to now suddenly vanishing without a trace—— Subaru dropped down his shoulders, smiling wryly, and more or less accepted that situation.

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[Subaru: There was no reply, I was starting to worry if something happened]

[Mom: What else could have happened. See, mom's mayonnaise bottle is empty. So I stole your dad's mayonnaise to slurp on and..... recently, I've been getting the feeling that Subaru's voice is becoming really similar to dad's. If you're on the phone I wouldn't even be able to tell the difference]

[Subaru: The topic kind of jumped there, but basically, you couldn't tell the difference between my voice and dad's so you tried hiding, huh. No, but, if you were trying to hide you'd want to be a bit more sneaky about it]

Facing his mother, who was sucking on the Mayo, Subaru took the caved-in bottle from her and let it expand back to its original shape, before putting it down on the table.

Staring at him, Naoko tilted her neck,

[Mom: Keep it a secret from your dad, ok? But see, slurping on your dad's mayonnaise, I get my favorite mayonnaise flavor combined with your dad's flavor at the same time, it's a great bargain isn't it?]

[Subaru: That sounds like the perverted testimony of a kid who steals a girl's recorder to lick it! Combining one favorite thing with another favorite thing to make something better, are you a kindergartener!?]

[Mom: So, what happened to your dad? Did you leave him behind? Subaru, when did you get fast enough to be able to leave your dad behind?]

[Subaru: It's not like I could win against dad in race in the first pla.....but, well, maybe]

Just as he was about to immediately refute his mother's question, Subaru swallowed it back into his chest.

When was the last time he had a race with his dad? Back then, his father didn't behave like an adult at all, and would mercilessly leave Subaru way behind in the dust.

Despondently watching his father's back vanishing into the distance, perhaps even at that point, a small sense of admiration had been sprouting in his heart.

But, how many years had already passed since then? If he raced with his father again, surely he wouldn't be left that far behind, or, he might even win.

That admiration only ever enlarging, Kenichi's existence inside Subaru had grown to an enormous size. All the while, having misunderstood its true essence, no one else could have saved him from it.

[Subaru: In the end, I still give up on everything half way, huh]

Saying this while leaning backwards and squeaking the back of his chair, Subaru flung out a big stretch. And, watching him do this, Naoko placed her hand over her lips and laughed,

[Subaru: What is it? Was something funny?]

[Mom: I thought, that gesture looks just like your father. Even back then, your dad likes to stretch on the back of his chair. He'd put too much force into it and throw himself right over]

[Subaru: It's not just the voice, even our movements are similar, huh. I really can't tell if that's good or bad right now]

[Mom: But I think it's a good thing. ——You're his son, after all]

“DOKUN”, single large thump sounded in his chest, and Subaru desperately tried to stop a groan from seeping out of his throat. Seeing his expression stiffen and his eyes growing wide, Naoko blinked several times with her sharp eyes, that looked exactly like Subaru's. Breathing in through his nose, Subaru managed to calm down the pounding of his heart, and,

[Subaru: I feel like I won't have the strength to leave again, if I stay here for too long.....]

Saying this, he stood up from his chair. With his mother's confused gaze looking up at him, Subaru scratched his cheek, as he turned,

[Subaru: So um, there's something I want to ask]

[Mom: En, I'm listening]

With an unconcerned air, as if pretending not to notice his reluctance and hesitation, Naoko occasionally glanced back and forth between him and the mayonnaise. The desire to hear her son continue his words, was probably as attractive as the impulse to continue slurping mayonnaise down her throat.

Taken aback at seeing his mother still not having changed a bit, Subaru's face broke into a small smile,

[Subaru: ——Do you, remember where my school uniform is stowed away?]

——He slid his arms through the dress shirt's perfectly ironed sleeves, and inserted his legs into the neatly folded trousers. Tightening his belt in front of the mirror, after an epic struggle he managed to tie up the dark green necktie. Then, putting on the navy blue blazer,

[Subaru: Student ▪ Natsuki Subaru, complete..... It must have been about three months now]

Confirming in front of the mirror that his transformation was complete, Subaru exhaled a deep breath as if having finished a big task.

The reflection in the mirror, was of a school uniform that hadn't been worn in a very long time. Being a blazer-styled uniform, it was a pain to have to tie the necktie every morning, as even to be stripped of a minute of precious sleeping time was extremely annoying. Even after tying it every day for two years, it still hadn't gotten better at all, and the knot still looked just as dopey. At the same time, there was a complicated feeling at the thought of this being his last chance to do it.

[Subaru: Should I try to get it perfect since it's the last time, or should I do it like I always did it?]

Even while mumbling this, the answer already appeared in his heart.

Lightly flicking the swollen bulge of his necktie, leaving the awkward knot intact, Subaru turned away from the mirror. And, looking around the room, he picked up his backpack. No matter how you look at it, it was the image of a model student ready to go to school.

[Subaru: Too bad it's way past home-room, it's already time for the third period to start. Leaving the house after the sun's already finished rising, what kind of crap model student does that]

Scratching his head while smiling wryly, Subaru did a stretch on the spot, and headed out of the room—— but just before leaving, he turned around to take another good look at his old room.

In all his life, Subaru had never moved houses, so this had been the only place he could have called “My Room”. From the time he entered middle school, for almost six years, he had been sleeping and waking inside this room. ——This would be last time he would see this place.

[Subaru: ————]

Without a word, Subaru quietly lowered his head.

Into that one gesture alone, was instilled the memories of all those six years.

With a long, long bow, he finished his farewell, and then, enthusiastically lifting up his face, Subaru turned his back to his room. With the sound of the door closing behind him, he made his way down the stairs, to find Naoko waiting in the living room, with her sharp eyes opened wide with surprise,

[Mom: Oh my. When you asked for the uniform, I thought you were going to burn it. I made all sorts of preparations too.....now it's all wasted]

[Subaru: When your son asked for his uniform the first thing you thought of was pyromania? And while we're on this topic, are those taros and skewered hot dogs you prepared assuming there was going to be a fire.....?]

Seeing a whole array of ingredients lined up on the table, Subaru was at a loss for words at his mother's happy-go-lucky reaction that defied all expectations. On the other hand, Naoko seemed completely unconcerned about Subaru's twitching face as she looked over his change of clothes from head to toe.

[Mom: Eun eun, looks good. They make you look like an adult, and kind of cancels out the eyes, and make you look toned-down a bit]

[Subaru: Mom you're currently robbing me of that tone-down as we speak!]

[Mom: Why are you so touchy? Want to lick some mayonnaise to calm down?]

[Subaru: I'm not really in the mood right now.....]

[Mom: Is-that-so]

The bottle of mayonnaise she held out——had a giant “S” written on the cap indicating it as Subaru’s personal mayonnaise. Only, Naoko seemed to have expected that reply from Subaru, and simply nodded,

[Mom: But Subaru, you don’t seem to actually like mayonnaise very much]

[Subaru: ————]

[Mom: It’s because you love dad and mom, that you lick it together with us, isn’t it]

Putting the mayonnaise with the Subaru-seal down on the table, spinning it round and round, Naoko said these words. And on the receiving end, Subaru’s throat clogged up. Shocked, his lips trembled and his breathing stopped,

[Subaru: Wh, what gave you tha.....]

[Mom: Then, Subaru, the world or mayonnaise, which do you choose?]

[Subaru: Um, the world.....]

[Mom: You see?]

[Subaru: What kind of example is that!! Why do you have a triumphant look on your face! A guy who would choose mayonnaise over the world doesn’t love mayonnaise, he just hates the world!]

Protesting against Naoko’s considerably off-beat remark, Subaru breathed heavily while scowling at the bottle of mayonnaise on the table. Then, with a small snort,

[Subaru:For how long, have you been thinking that]

[Mom: Since a long time ago. Dad and mom will always get depressed without mayonnaise, like the world is coming to an end, but Subaru isn’t like that]

[Subaru: The hurdle you expect of me is way too high, it's throwing me into despair, you know]

Subaru deflated at his mother's words. But his heart was not calm.

Subaru's status as a Mayo-lover was not in question. Without fail, whenever condiments are concerned, he would never leave out mayonnaise. He'd naturally dip all deep fried foods in mayonnaise. His devotion was to the point of rubbing mayonnaise on already mayonnaise-flavored snacks.

But why, had he always been so attached to mayonnaise——

[Subaru: It looked like you two were really enjoying it, so I wanted to enjoy it the same way too. Now that I think about it, I'm a Father-con and Mother-con, a total Fami-con.....](**Famicom is another name for the NES game console -tc*)

[Mom: Without the SUPA in front?]

[Subaru: SUPER • FAMILY COMPLEX, aka, SUPA-FAMI... ugh nevermind] (**SNES :3 -tc*)

In the middle of this completely pointless exchange, Subaru gave his head a shake and sighed. Then, slowly lifting up the mayonnaise bottle from the table,

[Mom: Ah—]

[Subaru: ——Pffhhuaa. Uuummu, so-good! After going so long without genuine mayonnaise, there's just nothing like it! The improvised mayonnaise on the other side is pretty good too, but the unhealthy store-bought kind with the artificial-colorings are the real deals!! The ones over there are just mayo-neese](**It's a mayo-lover jargon I think. Mayo-lovers are real, google “マヨラー” -tc*)

Squeezing the almost-full bottle flat, he swallowed all the mayonnaise in one gulp.

Savoring its sourness passing over his tongue, he let the burning sensation run down his throat and chest.

This, is the true MAYO-NAZING that mayo-addicts can never stop loving.

Using the back of his hand to wipe off a white stain left on the corner of his mouth, Subaru lifted up his head in front of the surprised Naoko.

[Subaru: I may not love mayonnaise as much as you two, but I am nonetheless a true and fervent disciple of mayonnaise-love. I swear it, on the bottle caps of all the mayonnaise I have licked to this day]

On a side note, the bottle caps of every mayonnaise Subaru had personally consumed in his lifetime were being stored away inside the closet of his room. The collection had since swelled to an uncanny number of 776. With the addition of the one just now, that number became 777.

[Subaru: It's the triple-seventh. Help me put it in the closet later]

[Mom: Oooh~, three sevens is a pretty lucky number. We were so delighted too when your dad hit four sevens the other day]

[Subaru: That is literally love of an entirely different magnitude!]

His mother happily took the emptied mayonnaise bottle from him. For a moment, Subaru sulked at his sense of accomplishment being spoiled, but immediately recovering his expression again,

[Subaru: So um.....I guess, it's time I should go, then]

[Mom: Ah, if you're going to the convenience store, buy some cream tarts while you're there, I suddenly want to eat them really badly]

[Subaru: Considering what I'm wearing, can you use a little imagination before saying that!?!]

Spreading out both his arms, he made that appeal. Seeing Subaru do this, Naoko laughed [Just kidding just kidding],

[Mom: But, you're going to school now? Even though mom is really glad..... won't you stand out if you get there so late? Why not just go tomorrow?]

[Subaru: Don't cripple your son's fledgling motivation right from outset. I only just barely got a little willpower put together by being a little harsher on others and a little more lenient on myself]

[Mom: If Subaru was that kind of child, then your mom wouldn't have had such a hard time]

Even with Subaru sneaking that self-deprecating comment in there, Naoko still replied as if she didn't get the point. Then, squinting her eyes and standing up with a [Al-right-then],

[Mom: Just wait a minute for mom to fetch her jacket]

[Subaru: Wait.....you, don't mean to come with me, right? It's not some kind of punishment game where parents personally accompany their ex-hikikomori child to school, is it!?!]

[Mom: Ok, but I won't go all the way to school. I'll just go up to the convenience store and get some mayonnaise and cream puffs. You're a big boy now]

[Subaru: Wh!? Why does that sound like I begged you to come with me!?!]

While Subaru was bemoaning the unacceptable flow of the conversation, his mother only casually dodged it with [Right right] while heading up to her room. And so, it was decided that she will accompany him half of the way to school.

[Subaru: Noonooo.....give me a break. Gees]

As he said this, Subaru's cheeks softened with a tinge of relief.

——Even if only for a little while, the time to say goodbye to his mother had been delayed, and thinking this, Subaru grew keenly aware of how weak he really was.

[Mom: It's been a long time since I walked with Subaru like this]

[Subaru: Has it? If it's at night, we come out on shopping expeditions all the time, right?]

[Mom: Haaa. You see, the flow of the conversation just now obviously meant noon. You have to think about what's beyond the words before responding]

[Subaru: I'm just, finding observational advice coming from mom a bit hard to swallow!]

Natsuki Naoko's observational skills were probably the worst in the world, to an almost demon-possessed degree.

That was the common understanding within the Natsuki family, or between Subaru and Kenichi, at least. The truth is, up against Naoko, no matter what kind of allegory or sarcasm was thrown at her, it would be nearly impossible to explain it to her afterward. Since she herself never seems to realize it, everything just naturally bounces right off of her, and stress will gradually build up the more one interacts with her.

Yet, in spite of that, Subaru still enjoys talking with his mother.

[Mom: I'm so glad it's warm today. What did you talk about with your father?]

[Subaru: Ooof, conversations-with-mother 101—— expect the first half and the second half to not be connected at all. Anyways, it wasn't anything in particular, it was just uhh.....]

Walking side by side on the road to school, Subaru wracked his brain for an answer to his mother's question.

If he told her all the details of his conversation with Kenichi, he would be forced to mention the embarrassing inner workings of his inferiority complex, and he couldn't exactly leave out the part where he cried, either.

Even though he knew it was necessary, it was only the surge of emotions of that moment, and he didn't know what it would become if he brought it out again now.

That's why,

[Subaru: It's no big deal.....We talked about Ikeda-san for a bit, and told some stories about the past]

[Mom: Aah, Ikeda-kun. He won big on a horse-ticket and moved to Thailand, then he got swindled by his local young wife out of everything he had, and ended up being driven into hard manual labor while getting scorched all black]

[Subaru: That's the first time I heard of the miserable developments of the second half!?!]

[Mom: He sent a letter to us, saying: "I couldn't get used to the dirty money after all. Right now, my body may be undergoing hardships, but my heart is fulfilled"]

[Subaru: Huh... so you went through a transformation owing to your experiences in an unknown place too, Ikeda-san.....I can totally relate to that!]

The only difference was replacing "parallel world" with "foreign country", and Subaru's circumstances would have been pretty much the same as Ikeda-san's. Unexpectedly finding a fellow traveler here, Subaru quietly wished him the best of luck.

Then, seeing Subaru's reaction, his mother tilted her neck with [Nnnn~]

[Mom: So, those stories of the past made you feel like going to school?]

[Subaru: Aah, well, that's the short version of it. It was a chance for me to look back on how I've gotten myself worried over all sorts of absurd things. And so I]

[Mom: Stopped wanting to do everything exactly the same way as your dad]

[Subaru: ————]

Originally hoping to gloss it over so he would not have to explain, Subaru suddenly found himself cornered by Naoko's words.

The smile on the side of her face did not change, nor did her sharp, and gentle eyes. In fact, perhaps that wasn't the intention behind her words, after all. But even so, Subaru felt like his heart had taken a direct hit when she pointed it out without him ever mentioning it.

Subaru fell silent, and happily walking ahead of him, Naoko was swinging her arms in wide arcs.

[Mom: It's because Subaru always tries so hard, and wants to do everything at once. And since your dad has all kinds of crazy interests, you had all sorts of opportunities too.....you must be exhausted]

[Subaru: M-mom.....just how much, do you know about me.....]

[Mom: Well let's see, Subaru]

As if she had known it all along, hearing his true feelings that he had even been hiding from himself coming out his mother's lips, Subaru couldn't utter another word.

At the call of his name, Subaru lifted his face. Cutting in front of him, his mother stopped still, and stared straight into Subaru's eyes,

[Mom: People often say, children watch their parents more than their parents realize]

[Subaru:]

[Mom: But the opposite is also true. Parents also watch over their children more than their children realize. Mom has been watching Subaru more than Subaru realizes too, you know?]

Hearing this, Subaru couldn't help but fall dumb and stupefied.

All the secrets he thought he had been keeping to himself, in reality, had been just a wasted effort. Withdrawing himself, putting on an air as if no one in the world could understand his pain, how vain and thoughtless he must have been.

[Mom: And when you were little, mom had to put suppositories in your butt, so I even know what your butt hole looks like. That means mom has seen every part of Subaru's body except the internal organs, you know]

[Subaru: S-sorry. It was going well for a bit, but it didn't seem incredibly necessary to mention the last part just now]

Even twin brothers don't really get to see each other's internal organs. In fact, even Subaru himself hadn't had that many opportunities to see them. There were just the one or two times when Subaru got the chance, but that was it.

Anyways,

[Subaru: So whether it was my reason for liking mayonnaise, or being a hikikomori.....]

[Mom: If there was something mom could do to help, mom would do it. But no matter what mom does, it seems it'll only make a mess of things. Still,]

With a little smile, she continued, gazing straight into Subaru's black pupils,

[Mom: It seems there was someone other than mom and dad, who did something for Subaru in the end. I think that's great. I really should thank that person]

[Subaru:En, yeah. There was someone who taught me how hopeless I was when I was hopeless. And there was someone who told my hopeless self that I wasn't entirely without hope. It's because of them, that I can walk forward like this now]

They made him aware of his own foolishness, and accepted him nonetheless. It was only because of them that Subaru could stand against his past——and face his parents this way.

Ah, really.

[Subaru: They're.....way too good for me]

[Mom: But, you won't give them away or anything, right?]

[Subaru: Of course not. Whether or not I deserve them is one thing. But if I have to give them away I'd rather hang on to them, and try to pile up my self-worth later on]

[Mom: Eun eun——You're every bit his son, after all]

They were words that held a special significance to Subaru.

Yet his mother understood this, and surely knew what those words meant to him. To say them even while knowing that,

[Subaru: Can I really live up to it? Can I really be worthy of being his son?]

[Mom: No problem. Well, since half of Subaru came from mom, you'll meet the quota if you just become half as awesome as dad]

[Subaru: So you already knew that your part of the genes that made up my body are inferior!?!]

[Mom: Well half of you is already made of your dad's coolness..... for the remaining half, why not just be Subaru?]

Seeing Subaru unmoved, Naoko gave this reply.

And upon hearing these words, Subaru only felt dumb, with his mouth open.

[Mom: You don't have to be totally-and-totally the same as your dad. Because if Subaru is exactly the same as dad, then there'll be two dads, and mom will get all confused, you know?]

[Subaru: A feminine heart wavering between husband and son, what are we, in an erotic novel!?!]

[Mom: No don't, stop it, nyaaaaa!]

[Subaru: GUPWAH!?!]

No sooner had Subaru's finished his last word, than a fist came flying over to hide her blush.

Eating an unexpectedly powerful right-hook straight in the face, Subaru went flying backwards. While he was almost crying from the pain, Naoko quickly turned her back and,

[Mom: So that's why, mom thinks Subaru should do his best]

[Subaru: That's a nice summary, but I'm kind of bleeding here]

[Mom: Speaking of blood, don't iron pipes taste kind of like blood when you lick them?]

[Subaru: It's kind of hard to imagine the kind of extreme situation where..... anyways, conversations-with-mother intermediate lesson, expect totally random questions after sudden loss of direction]

It'd be useless even if he painstakingly tried to explain how the iron content of blood is similar to the iron in iron pipes. If he took these kind of questions seriously here, he would only get "how come you're going off-topic now?" or something similarly aggravating and unreasonable in return,

Therefore, ignoring the context of everything,

[Subaru: I should just be myself, huh]

[Mom: Right right. While trying to be like your dad, also be Subaru]

Naoko looked satisfied at finally getting to a conclusion. Then, suddenly halting her steps in front of Subaru, Naoko pointed to the right side of the split in the road up ahead.

[Mom: Well, the convenience store is this way, so mom will only go up to here Will you be ok by yourself?]

[Subaru: There's no need to worry.....actually I'm seriously injured here, yeah]

Naoko wasn't excessively worried.

But if Subaru hesitated now, he'd just be way too much of a coward in his mother's eyes, wouldn't he? So, to put his mother's mind at rest,

[Subaru: It's fine. The things I have to do, and the things I want to do, are exactly the same right now. I have no reason to close myself off anymore]

[Mom: Is that so? That's good. Then, do your best]

Nodding with relief at Subaru's answer, Naoko skipped away with little steps toward the road that split off into the right. Subaru's path was to the left, so he must part with his mother here.

But if they went their separate ways now, he knew, without a doubt, that their parting will be far, far longer than his mother realized——

[Subaru: Mom——!]

Unable to endure watching his mother's back disappear, Subaru called out loudly for his mother to stop.

His mother, already carried away by her quest for mayonnaise, stopped her skipping steps and turned her body around. Just the same as always, the sight of his mother's unchanged figure imprinted itself into his eyes.

[Subaru: Ah.....]

Goodbye, trying to come up with some kind of goodbye, Subaru hesitated.

Right now, if he doesn't say his goodbyes here, his mother will have no idea just how long their parting will be. Subaru would lose the chance to see his mother breaking down crying, knowing they will never meet again. But if he didn't want his last memory of his mother to be her face covered in tears, it would be better if he kept his mouth shut. Yet if he did that, it would be a lie told under the pretense that he was sparing the other person and himself,

[Subaru: ——There is, something I absolutely have to do. So this goodbye will be for very long time]

and Natsuki Subaru's heart would not allow that.

Having been told these words, Naoko didn't say a thing. And before she could react, Subaru pressed on,

[Subaru: It's somewhere a bit far away, and there's no way to communicate. There will be all sorts of, worrying things. But it's definitely not dangerous.....though I can't really

guarantee that. Oh, what am I saying, honestly it's because it's a horribly dangerous place that I have to go back to save them]

Speaking quickly. Piling on the information. All the things he wanted to say spilled out.

[Subaru: Mom and dad will be worried, I think. Unlike up to yesterday, when we could always see each other, it's a place where you'll have no way to see me. But no matter where I am, I'll be thinking of you two, and I'll never forget.....]

[Mom: Subaru]

[Subaru: I will never not want to be you two's child anymore, and I won't do anything that I'd hate myself for. Even though I know, after what I said, you won't be able to watch me go without worrying, but I.....]

[Mom: Subaru]

No longer knowing what he was saying anymore, his mother's voice suddenly stopped him.

Lifting up his face, his mother was standing right in front of him.

[Mom: Subaru ——it's alright]

[Subaru:it's, alright?]

[Mom: Because I understand, what Subaru is trying to say. So there's no need to try so hard to find the words]

[Subaru: You understand.....how.....?]

[Mom: Because mom is Subaru's mom, after all]

——That was a, completely illogical statement, but there was no room for any counter-arguments at all.

The depth of his eyes grew hot. That feeling, was the same as what he felt only an hour ago.

Just how many times will Subaru have to cry like a little child? Always shedding tears at everything like this, when will he ever grow an iron heart that doesn't waver against such things?

[Subaru: I'm still.....just like a little child.....it's so embarrassing.....]

[Mom: If crying when you want to cry is embarrassing, then all the little babies are totally embarrassing when they're born]

[Subaru: Not.....what I meant.....]

[Mom: Eun eun, I know. In front of mom and dad, no matter how old Subaru becomes.....you should cry whenever you want to cry]

The world was blurring beyond the overflowing tears. Hiding behind his sleeves while wiping his eyes, Subaru didn't want his mother to see his face like this. And Naoko didn't peek, out of respect for his wish.

Only, slowly, gently, she caressed Subaru's hair while standing on tiptoes.

[Subaru:Sorry, mom. I, in the end I, can't do anything for you two.....]

[Mom: We didn't give birth to you expecting something in return, you know? We had you because we wanted to do something for you. It's because mom loves you, that mom gave birth to Subaru]

——The love described by those words, Subaru had already experienced them countless times before.

[Mom: If you want to do something for mom and dad, just pass that same feeling onto someone else. It could be the girl Subaru loves, and if you make a baby with her, pass it onto the baby.....that would be the best way, wouldn't it?]

[Subaru:Yeah, it would be]

[Mom: See. Stuff mom says can never go wrong you know]

With a satisfied giggle, Naoko tickled Subaru's forelock with her finger.

Then, pushing on his chest to make him take a step back, she looked Subaru over from head to toe,

[Mom: When your face gets messy from crying, it looks more and more like mom's, it's kind of weird]

[Subaru:I'm, impressed you'd use your own face as an analogy]

[Mom: I draw my confidence from the fact that it's the face your dad loves. So, sharing mom's confidence, Subaru can also draw confidence from your dad's love, you know]

[Subaru: Even though it's only because of the face!]

Forcibly wiping his face with his sleeves, it had become red-hot around his eyes when the tears finally stopped.

Crying his heart out, exposing his true feelings only to be consoled, and then, seeing himself finally clearing up, how ridiculous he must be.

[Subaru: Ah really, I always end up crying it's so pathetic]

[Mom: Crying isn't a bad thing. Subaru, when you were born, you cried like crazy, you know. No matter who it is, when they first come out, they cry and cry it's so embarrassing. Crying in all kinds of places, in all kinds of situations]

[Subaru: ————]

[Mom: And after crying for a long, long time, if you're smiling at the end, then everything is alright. What's most important isn't the beginning or the middle, it's the end]

[Subaru: In other words, if the results are good, then it's all O-K?]

[Mom: That's incorrect if you interpret it like that. Then, this will be your homework from mom]

Though he would never get a chance to check the answers.

Handing out that homework assignment was another way of saying goodbye. Receiving it, Subaru stored it deep within his heart. Perhaps one day, when he finds the answer, he would just naturally come to understand it.

It wasn't exactly a clean and gallant parting scene.

But his father and mother, after hearing that their ex-hikikomori son is going to disappear into some far and unknown place, did not reproach him, but rather sent him off with smiling faces.

Every bit of it, his past, his parents, his environment, he loved it all in its entirety.

[Subaru: ——I'm going, then]

[Mom: En, alright]

Giving his head a shake, at last, he forced his face into a smile.

Leaving his mother with that clumsy smile, Subaru turned his back and began to walk.

It would be the final stretch of the road to school. Following this branch of the road to the end, after going up a slope, he would find the school building waiting for him there, and——

[Mom: Ah, right. Subaru, Subaru, I almost forgot]

And, just as he got himself pumped up and ready to face what was to come, an air-headed voice came calling from behind.

Almost stumbling over from the impact of that discouragement, Subaru turned around dejectedly.

Wondered what she was going to say at the very end, he saw his mother raising up her arm,

[Mom: ——Have a safe trip]

Then, with a little wave of her hand, she said it with a smile.

——On the final night before he was summoned to the Parallel World, when he set out for the convenience store, his mother had said this to him in the exact same way. But that time, Subaru only pushed open the door in a bad mood, without saying a thing.

[Subaru: ———]

So, this would be the last chance, to erase his regret from that day——

Conversations-with-mother, advanced lesson—— no matter how many times you get sidetracked, the correct answer somehow always emerges in the end.

The moment he remembered that, his strained cheeks softened, and turned into a genuine smile.

[Subaru: ——Ok, I'm going now!]

High and crisp, Subaru's voice rang out, across the road that led to school.

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An unpopulated school building. Heading from the entryway to the shoe closets, with some trouble, he opened the doors that seemed to not have been opened or closed in a very long time. Changing from his outdoor shoes to indoor ones, knocking his toes on the floor a few times to fit his feet inside, at last, with a sigh, Subaru stepped into the hallway. Subaru was in the 3rd year, where, out of the 8 home-classes, he was in the 6th. And in 3rd-year class 6, the student numbers were mixed between males and female students, and so Subaru's number was 22.

Being the highest year, all the 3rd year classrooms were on the first floor, just across the hallway, past the stairs.

In the dead-silent corridor, there were only the echoes of Subaru's own footsteps striking

upon the linoleum floor as he made his way to his classroom.

It wasn't long before he reached it. Standing in front of the door, he took a deep breath.

[Subaru: ————]

Placing his hand on the door, he slid it open.

In the moments that followed, there should be a crowd of reproachful eyes locking onto him, to admonish him for arriving so late to class, but——

[???: You came a lot earlier than I thought]

That was not the sight that greeted him.

On the other side of the opened doorway, he saw rows upon rows of empty desks, except only for the one seat in the center of the room.

Then, the person sitting there, turning her chair toward Subaru,

[Echidona: Welcome. ——In all that time spent facing your past, have you learned anything?]

Asked the Witch of Greed with her white hair swaying, her eyes brimming with curiosity.



Chapter 20 [Test Results]

——Seated in the center of the classroom, the white-haired girl slightly tilted her head.

Receiving her gaze, Subaru quickly looked around the room to make sure there was no one else present. And then, sticking out half of his body into the hallway, he checked left and right just to be sure——Confirming once again that there was no one else, he scratched his head and let out a sigh.

[Subaru: There's just something I have to say first]

[Echidona: Sure, I'm listening. What are you feeling, what are you thinking, and what do you want to say to me? I am very interested to hear all of it]

[Subaru: You look, super good in that uniform]

Facing the Witch whose eyes were beaming with curiosity, Subaru stuck out a finger and blurted out his thoughts. And hearing this, the Witch seemed to blank out for a moment, until she couldn't hold it in anymore and burst out laughing,

[Echidona: Waha, why thank you. If you think so, then it was worth it for me to reconstruct this from your memories. In fact, this outfit seems to be the most vivid out of all your memories, and the one you've looked at the most. Is it a favourite of yours?]

Standing up from her seat, picking up the hems of her grey skirt——Echidona did a quick little spin on the spot. Her white, shoulder-length hair dancing with her movements, her playful figure looked perfectly like a youthful girl of her age.

Grey skirts, and a deep blue blazer. The red ribbon below her neck marked her as in the same year as Subaru, and in contrast underneath, her white dress-shirt shone bright and dazzling.

Only, if there was one thing that he was dissatisfied with,

[Subaru: Compared to short skirts, I prefer long skirts a little better. That way it takes longer to lift them up and there's more time to ignite one's imaginations]

[Echidona: I see. Then, to measure up to your skirt-lifting expectations, I will wear a longer skirt next time]

[Subaru: We won't get a chance for that! Also, it's not because I like it that everyone wears this uniform. It's just a rule here that we have to dress like this. Kind of like the Imperial Knights and stuff]

"Kusukusu", Echidona covered her lips and giggled. With an attitude as if she wasn't really planning to take Subaru's excuses seriously, even if he tried to exonerate himself, he won't be getting the result he wanted.

Shrugging, Subaru walked to the back of the classroom—to the seat beside the window in the second-to-last row, and pulling out his chair in that half-assed location, he plonked himself down.

The tactile sensation of the hard, wooden chair. The edges of the desk that had alphabets carved into it by some previous occupant. The desk-leg that creaked whenever he put his weight on it while falling asleep. And the festering rust on the insides of the drawer. They were all fragments of Subaru's distant, and bygone days.

[Echidona: And here I thought you'd be a little more surprised]

[Subaru: If you wanted to hide it, you'll have to put more effort into the background, you know. There wasn't even a single person walking around on my way here, that's just way too unrealistic]

Even considering that it was a weekday afternoon, it may have just been a little too unpopulated along Subaru's path. Almost as if everything irrelevant to Subaru's past had simply been cut from this world.

[Subaru: This world was just way too convenient for me. So it's your own damn fault that you didn't get to see the reaction you wanted]

[Echidona: No no no, that's a part of the fun too. Experimenting, and receiving the results are in themselves a kind of happiness for me. What the results are at this point, doesn't matter much. Unless, of course, if we are talking about how future events will be influenced by these results, then it would be a different matter]

Echidona waved her hands left and right as she said this, as if she really wasn't sour about the way things had veered outside her expectations. Seeing her without a trace of negative emotion, in his heart, Subaru secretly wanted to click his tongue.

[Subaru: So then, what is this world supposed to be? I'm sure I went in your Tomb while it was in the middle of the Trials, and then.....]

[Echidona: You entered while possessing the qualifications. So naturally, you began the trials as well, correct? Didn't you hear it? "First, you must face your past"]

Confirming Subaru's thoughts with these words, Echidona placed her hands behind her back as she slowly walked toward Subaru. Her beautiful hair swaying in the cool, refreshing breeze that had blown into the classroom, without a sense of incongruity, the girl in her uniform blended seamlessly into her surroundings.

Her every casual gesture feeling like a trap set to entice his heart, Subaru consciously turned his gaze away from her. Then,

[Echidona: Anyone, would have regrets about the past. As long as they live day after day, no one is without regrets. Today they regret yesterday, yesterday they regret further before that, and when tomorrow comes, surely, you would regret something about today. —People have the capacity to regret, after all]

[Subaru: That's a pretty pessimistic way of thinking about it. If we just replace "regret" with "self-reflection", then today we'd be reflecting on yesterday, and tomorrow we'd be

reflecting on today, and, maybe, we might find some kind of breakthrough, isn't that's a human ability as well?]

[Echidona: ——Precisely!]

Clapping her hands together with an insatiable voice, Echidona shoved her face up close, making Subaru instinctively shrink back. But, undeterred, she continued leaning in, staring into his eyes with her black pupils, at a distance where they could feel each other's breaths,

[Echidona: It's a simple play on words, or, rather, a slightly different way of thinking. But depending on whether you view the past with pessimism or optimism, the answers become worlds apart. Most people look to the past pessimistically and always only see the bad memories, and so they treat the path they have walked with denial. Then, growing even more repulsed by the sight of what they have denied, they close their hearts, and try to forget]

[Subaru: Hey, your face.....is kinda close.....]

[Echidona: But can you blame them? Compared to today, your yesterday's self was certainly more ignorant. And compared to what you will know tomorrow, your today's self would no doubt be found lacking. The total sum of knowledge, or even just the number of memories, would always put the past at a disadvantage compared to the present and the future. That is simply the fact!]

Completely disregarding Subaru who was being pushed back by her aura, in a state of heated passion, Echidona pressed on her delivery. Suddenly turning her body away, she forcefully slammed her palms on the top of the desk,

[Echidona: And so, when people face their past, or when they actually meet their past, they become lost, confused, lamenting, suffering, anguishing, despairing, and there, they will find their answer. As long as they find their answer, no matter what kind of answer it is,

I will give it my affirmation. Whether it was an answer they received by turning their backs, or by reaching their arms forward, it would be unmistakable proof that they have overcome their past]

[Subaru: That's, the purpose of this Trial?]

[Echidona: Correct. It is to face one's past, and come to some kind of answer about that past. If they are afraid of finding the answer, loathing it, or are hesitating and at their wit's end, then the Trials could never be overcome. However, if they could either accept their past, or if they could deny it completely and sever themselves from it, then I would see them off with my praises. That, is the first of the Trials]

Nodding to Subaru, who seemed to have understood, Echidona returned to her original self, and, with a slight blush on her cheeks, she quietly cleared her throat.

[Echidona: I, I seem to have gotten a little overexcited. I'm sorry I showed you something unsightly]

[Subaru: No worries. If you had bad breath though, that would've gone badly, but fortunately, yours smelled like citrus. More importantly.....]

Feeling a bit sentimental over the rare chance to see Echidona embarrassed, Subaru pulled up his chair and leaned his body forward, and,

[Subaru: If those points you mentioned are the conditions for passing the Trial, can I take that to mean I've passed the Trial?]

[Echidona: Having watched everything from beginning to end.....I think the results were more than satisfactory]

Placing her hand over her chest, Echidona inhaled deeply as if filling her lungs with the aroma of fragrant black-tea, and then, with a terribly satisfied look on her face,

[Echidona: Whether it was the symbol of the traumas of your past, or the representation of your past guilt, you have found your answers. For that, I send you off with my praises]

[Subaru: From beginning to end.....doesn't that mean you saw me crying with snot dripping down my nose too!?]

[Echidona: I'm sowee, even I couldn't help tearing up in the eyes at those parts]

[Subaru: Shut up!! And don't you tell anyone, it's embarrassing!!]

The scene of his parting with his father where he poured out all his emotions, it wouldn't be funny at all if some pervert had been watching them all that time. Above all, it would be an insult to the emotions between Subaru and Kenichi in that moment.

"Kusukusu", regardless of whether she could understand such sentiments, Echidona bursted out laughing,

[Echidona: If there was anything I was disappointed with, it would be that you hadn't experienced the agony even deeper when you came face to face with your past]

[Subaru: Huh?]

[Echidona: I like when people reach their answers, but I think the suffering on their path to the answers is something praiseworthy in itself. I was looking forward to watching you find an answer through the anguish and struggles, but.....]

Casting a side-glance at Subaru, as if peering into the depths of his black irises, she narrowed her eyes,

[Echidona: Unfortunately, this Trial seems to have started a little too late for me to enjoy such a treat. It appears you have already found the answer to the negative feelings from your past before coming here]

[Subaru: Aah.....is that so. If that's the case, I really should offer my sympathies]

Somewhat able to understand Echidona's disappointment, Subaru exhaled a deep sigh through his nose.

If the Trials had gone the way she had hoped, Subaru would have returned to his parents, the source of his past trauma, and over the time spent with them, realized his own weakness, agonized over it, and reached an answer either by running away or facing it head on, and, at last, found the resolve to come here.

But Subaru had already...

[Subaru: Even when I was completely, hopelessly useless, there was a girl who told me I was a hero. So there was no need for me to face my past, I've already come to terms with the fact that I'm useless]

[Echidona: So you've arrived at a different form of resignation, I see. But to have it stray so far from my expectations, it really is an utter disappointment. The next time you meet that person outside, tell her that a Witch had some complaints to say about her]

Just as he was about to throw in a joke about that threatening remark, Subaru suddenly noticed. There was something Echidona said that he couldn't let slide.

[Subaru: A while ago you said you formed this reconstruction from on my memories.....If you can peek inside my head, then shouldn't you know about the girl I spoke of?]

Or, perhaps rather than noticing it, it was him desperately clinging to a feeling that he could not let go of. Even if it meant having someone peek inside his head, if there was just someone who could remember Rem after she had been forgotten by all the world, remember her lovely features, remember that this girl still existed... But,

[Echidona: Sorry to disappoint you. But even being a thing of Greed, I can distinguish between what is right and wrong. Though I have extracted the information I needed to conduct this Trial, I have not touched anything else. If I simply stole all the knowledge out of your head, then where would be the fun in that? I am not quite ready to abandon the pleasures of simply listening to others just yet]

The only thing he got as a reply, was some kind of Witch's sense of honor that was beyond his capacity to understand.

One could even call them Echidona's convictions. However shameless that logic may be, it was not something Subaru could argue with. Still,

[Subaru: If you only pulled out parts that were relevant to the Trial.....then why did you pull out that uniform.....]

[Echidona: Obviously, I pulled it because it was a piece of information necessary for me to reconstruct this building you call "School". It definitely wasn't because after discovering a new Parallel World, I wondered what the girls here wore and whether it would maybe look nice on me or anything of that sort]

[Subaru: Are you, one of those highly intelligent idiots?]

After listening to Echidona essentially confessing the whole thing, Subaru sighed and shook his head.

So it was like that. It wasn't the answer he had hoped to hear, but at least now he knew something for certain. Which was that,

[Subaru: There's probably no need for me to ask this. But this world is.....]

[Echidona: Aah, that's right. This is a fabricated world created based on your memories, meant to be an extremely faithful reconstruction of reality. Which means, of course——your real parents still have no idea where you are or what you are doing, and must be worrying to no end about their son, who had simply disappeared]

[Subaru: ————]

[Echidona: As for the information you didn't know before, who knows if you hadn't inadvertently brought them here..... are you so sure that you didn't know about them? The letters from your parents' old friend, can you be certain that you have never seen them? The old man who had known your father since he was a child, have you really

never met him before? And have you truly never imagined an image of your father that was different from the one you knew, and never once traced it over inside your mind?]

Firing off her words in rapid succession, [Or rather,] Echidona continued,

[Echidona: Did you really think that as long you didn't know what was hidden in your heart, they would simply stay hidden? The contents your true heart that are yearning to be freed, how could you be certain that they are safely sealed away, and would not leak through along with the rest of the mundane little details? And still, can you be sure that your self-serving desire to be loved, did not beg your fictional father and mother to behave the way they did?]

Putting her face up close against the silent Subaru's, Echidona's last words fell to a bewitching whisper, teasing at the strings of his heart. And then, at a distance close enough to feel each other's breaths,

[Echidona: It was just too ideal, and too convenient——don't you think?]

[Subaru: ————]

Tenderly gouging open Subaru's heart with her soft fingertips, Echidona smiled sweetly. Unlike a smile that would have suited a girl her age, this one was abominable, like one belonging to a Witch out of the folklores.

His mind toyed and tormented by her penetrating words, Subaru squeezed close his eyes. In the back of his closed eyelids, in that pitch-black world, emerged his last impressions of his parents——

[Subaru: Don't belittle my parents just because you didn't get what you wanted, Witch]

[Echidona:what?]

[Subaru: I've already told them all of my answers. And my mom and dad both received it. I've told them everything that I was never able to say, and they told me to give it my best, and then wished me a safe journey]

Standing up from his chair, placing his hands on the desk, he pressed back his face against Echidona's so that their foreheads touched. Watching the Witch's black eyes opening wide in surprise, Subaru,

[Subaru: Their voices, their smiles, everything from those moments shattered my imaginations. ——My parents, are not some empty casks that can be filled with my fantasies. Don't you underestimate them]

[Echidona: ———]

[Subaru: I've already told them everything I wanted to say. And after having put everything to rest, I came here.——Nothing you say can trick me]

Pulling back his forehead from her's, Subaru sat down in his chair once more. Then, leaning backwards into his chair, he rudely crossed his legs and stared at Echidona with an insolent gaze.

For a moment, Echidona seemed astounded by Subaru's reaction,

[Echidona: Really.....You wouldn't even let me see you questioning your answers for a minute, you really are a human who would make a Witch cry. How exceptional indeed]

[Subaru: I'm going blush if you praise me like that. I'm the kind of guy who grows when he gets praised, you know. I can feel myself getting taller as we speak!]

[Echidona: I see you're never at a loss for words..... Aah, but it's good enough. It's more than good enough. It's a delightful thing, to see such a firm answer that would not allow itself to be shaken]

As if giving up, Echidona shook her head with a smile, and then, pulling out the chair in front of Subaru, she sat down facing him,

[Echidona: The Trial is now over, in its truest sense. You have escaped the evil clutches of a Witch, it seems. As a reward.....is there anything you wish to ask me before you go back?]

[Subaru: Oh, then there is one thing]

[Echidona: En, let's hear it]

Echidona nodded, as Subaru stuck out a finger pointing directly at her,

[Subaru: Before, you said you had nothing to do the Trials..... How is this nothing to do with it!? You're not just involved, you're pretty much the main culprit. What's with that blatant straight-faced lie about having no influence over the Trials!]

[Echidona: To take a Witch at her word... even naivety and gullibility should have a limit. Didn't I tell you the last time we parted? I am a wicked Witch, after all]

[Subaru: Aah, is that right. Then, I can't trust a single word from this wicked Witch, can I. In that case I have nothing else to ask.By the way, is the seal on the Sanctuary removed now?]

[Echidona: And here you are asking another question as if nothing happened... you really don't bother putting up appearances, do you? Unfortunately, it would be too simple if the Trials ended with this. There are a total three parts to the Trials. But since you already passed the first Trial, I don't think they would be too difficult for you]

Sidestepping Subaru's indignation, Echidona held out three fingers as she answered him. Receiving this, Subaru muttered [Three parts.....] under his breath,

[Subaru: One way or another, I'll have to unseal the Sanctuary. So, once I clear the other two Trials, it will be released, right? Can I take that as a guarantee?]

[Echidona: That's why I gave you the Qualifications. So of course. If you or any qualified halfblood overcomes the Trials, the Sanctuary will be liberated with my blessings. How will you overcome the next two Trials, I wonder. I will happily look forward to the answers you will give]

Watching Echidona nodding in affirmation, Subaru responded [Is that so], and stood up. There was nothing else he wanted to ask. So there was nothing more to gain by dawdling in this fabricated world. A certain nostalgic feeling made him almost want to stay, but he had already said all his reluctant goodbyes.

Even if, as the Witch said, they were only transient and fleeting things.

[Subaru: Hey, Echidona]

[Echidona: What is it? Perhaps you would like to punch me before you go? Well, I realize I would deserve it, considering my conduct towards you. So if you wish, I am willing to accept it without complaints. But still, I am only a young girl, after all. If you could please avoid the face if possible.....]

[Subaru: Thank you]

[Echidona: ————]

Speechless, after going on and on trying to vindicate herself, Echidona suddenly lost her words.

Seeing her like this, for the first time, Subaru felt a small sense of gratification,

[Subaru: Even if it didn't really happen, and my words didn't really reach those two, I was able to say the things I wanted to say thanks to you. Even if it was because of your crappy-gossip-deprived curiosity, I was able to see the people I thought I would never see again, and say my goodbyes]

And show them that their hopeless, small, disappointing son had become a little less hopeless, had grown a little more, and could now hold his head a little higher.

[Subaru: For that, I am grateful. So, thank you]

[Echidona:You're a human I can't understand at all, it's very fascinating. It's almost frightening, in fact]

Echidona wasn't joking or lying, and the look in her eyes seemed as if she was genuinely threatened by him. Seeing her like this, Subaru lifted the corners of his lips and smiled in reply,

[Subaru: Witch-sama must get frightened easily if she could be caught by a little kid like me. Oh well. So um, where's the exit?]

[Echidona: Leaving won't be difficult. Even now, this world is already beginning to fade. Nothing outside of this building is solid anymore. ——Leaving this building should return you directly to the insides of the Tomb]

[Subaru: That's pretty convenient. ——In that case, see you next Trial, I guess]

With a wave of his hand, Subaru got up from his seat and headed out of the classroom. Sensing Echidona's gaze trailing behind him, Subaru walked out without looking back. In the world outside the window, dissolving into the encroaching vast, blue sky, the scenes in the distance began to fade. The fabricated world which had fulfilled its purpose, was vanishing into nothing.

The father who had patted on Subaru's back, and the mother who had walked with Subaru to send him off, were both fading along with the disappearance of this world. Until they were nowhere to be found.

[Subaru:You guys have already taught me all the most important things]

In front of him, the world gradually turned to white, as far as his eyes can see, and——

Therefore, Envy will not forgive Echidona, who had touched what was forbidden.

Leaping backwards, Echidona narrowly avoided annihilation, while, as if in pursuit, shadowy arms extended out, aiming for her neck. In the face of the pitch-black serpents baring their fangs, Echidona let out a sigh,

Saying this, Echidona slightly lowered her body, when the shadows that were aiming for her throat exploded from the impact.

[Sekhmet: Looks like I got called up again, haaaaa. I can't even get a good night's sleep, huuu]

Languidly huffing with her legs sprawled out on the floor, the purple haired girl ——The Witch of Sloth, Sekhmet appeared.

[Sekhmet: Haaa, it's no use]

Beaten back by the power of the strike, the rest of shadow sank into the darkness it had created. Lightly shaking its head at this outcome, the shadow reached out its right arm toward Sekhmet.

Immediately after, the darkness that had engulfed half of the classroom attacked at once,

as dark demonic claws shot out, covering over everything in sight. The impenetrable blackness sealed off every direction—— But,
[Sekhmet: Didn't I just say it's useless, huuuu]

The Maelstrom of black claws scattered in the blink of an eye, and without the least resistance or reserve, the counter-attack struck into the shadow's entire body. While the shock of impact after impact were nailing the shadow's flesh into the cracks of the wall, Sekhmet only remained crouched up on the floor without the slightest movement, lazily looking on.

But even so, Sekhmet's attacks continued to assail the shadow's entire body, until gradually, that bottomless form began to break apart.

Against the deafening sound of the impacts, and the sight of the writhing shadow, Sekhmet only scratched at her hair as she watched,

[Sekhmet: With most of your power sealed away, haaa. And being inside nasty Echidona's citadel, huu. In a state that deprives you of your full potential, haaa, you're no match against me, huu]

Trying to hold back a yawn, Sekhmet's attacks ceased, and the defeated shadow dropped to its knees——when a strike from above mercilessly nailed it into the floor.

Sinking into the pitch-black darkness, the fading Envy looked up at Sekhmet.

[???: *Why do you why do you why do you why do you why do you why do you why do you stand in between in between in between in between in between in between in between in between me me me me me and him and him and him and him and him and him and him and him——?*]

[Sekhmet: Haaaa. ——It'd be too much of a bother to explain]

With this bitter reply, Sekhmet made a little downward swing with her raised hand.

In that same instant, half of the school building collapsed, and along with the crumbling dirt and lumps of earth, the shadow of Envy was swallowed into the depths of the ground. In a world that was already fading, there would be no way to return from there.

[Sekhmet: Even after I'm dead, huuu. Why do I still have to deal with this stuff, haaaa]

Her own actions having sped up the collapse of this world, the Witch of Sloth found a relatively nicer spot in the corner of the decaying classroom, and nudged herself over on her butt.

Huddling up with her back against the wall, feeling herself being drawn into the void of the dying world that had finished serving its purpose, she looked out through a shattered window at the Sun.

[Sekhmet: Nothing ever goes the way you want them to, huuu. Whether you're a Witch—or the one ensnared by a Witch, haaaa]

With a final, languorous sigh, the world vanished into light.

Chapter 21 [A Renewed Resolve]

When he opened his eyes, the first thing Subaru felt was that something dusty had gotten into his mouth.

Mingling with the saliva that had accumulated in his mouth, he unconsciously touched it with the tip of his tongue——tasting the flavor of soil and gravel, he spat it out as quickly as he could. And then, jumping up,

[Subaru: Ueggh! Pftephtoo! Weird little pebbles got in my mouth.....ooueeghh]

Spitting while dusting himself off, Subaru turned his head all around, straining his eyes trying to see in the darkness.

The space that had lost its source of light was filled with frigid air——there, he remembered he was inside a Tomb which tested those who entered. And at the same time,

[Subaru: Right, I took the Trial.....]

After he dashed into the Tomb, he lost consciousness and was brought into a dream world. In the past known as the first Trial——although he wasn't sure if "past" would be the right word, Subaru faced his immutable origins, and said his final farewells to those he left behind, and, at last, finding out that all of it had been wrapped within a Witch's palms, he was brought back here.

One by one, recalling all that had happened after he lost consciousness, Subaru confirmed that his memories were clear. To his parents inside the dream, whom he will never meet again, he had said all his apologies, his thanks, and his goodbyes. And, in place of his tremendous nostalgia and sorrow, they had granted him courage and resolve.

[Subaru: Don't worry. I didn't forget. I still remember everything we said to each other]

He had worried that in the worst case his memories might have been damaged from being broken into, so it was fortunate that he still remembered everything.

Having finished checking his own body, the next thing that came to Subaru's mind was, [Subaru: Right.....! The reason I came in here was, —Emilia!]

Scolding himself for being so slow to come to his senses, Subaru turned back into the room——and found Emilia lying sideways on the floor, the same way as he had been. Rushing over, her white skin and silver hair shone all the more prominently in the darkness, sensing that she was still breathing, he was washed with a wave of relief. But, it was only until he saw her expression.

[Emilia:h.....ah, no.....stop.....]

[Subaru: ————]

Emilia's face was twisted in agony, and sweat was emerging on her forehead. But no matter how painful her expression had become, her body couldn't seem to move. Her limbs remained rigid as if frozen still, and only her face revealed the colors of her suffering.

If she was going through the same type of Trial as Subaru, then,

[Subaru: It must be a past you don't want to see.....or no, it should be a past that you need to resolve, no matter what.....?]

He didn't know how much time had passed, but Emilia had entered the Tomb 30 minutes before he did. Yet even so, Subaru returned before her, which meant he could only imagine how difficult her Trial must be.

True to the literal sense of the phrase, her expression was groaning in pain.

Originally, he thought he should have faith in her, and wait for her to return safely from the Trials, but——

[Subaru: Looking at this expression, what kind of guy could say something pretty like that]

Watching the side of Emilia's face that looked like she was about to cry, Subaru extended out a finger, hoping to ease even a small fraction of her pain. But, the moment his finger touched her cheek,

[Emilia: ————!]

Emilia's previously frozen limbs began to spasm out of control. Seeing her face that was contorted by pain turning stiff, Subaru hurriedly held out his arm to support her head, and embraced the trembling Emilia tightly into his chest, without letting go.

[Subaru: Emilia!? Hey, hold on.....Emilia!]

Rubbing her back as he held her close, he desperately called the trembling Emilia's name. The sight of her severe convulsions made his heart shrivel with horror, but, gradually, her trembling body calmed,

[Emilia: ———huh, baru?]

[Subaru: ———! Ah, aahah, yeah. Are you alright? You remember me, right? I'm the person you vowed your future life to, Natsuki Subaru]

[Emilia: I don't, remember going that far.....]

Giving her memory a jolt as she woke up, Subaru confirmed that she was conscious and that her memories weren't muddled. As he let go of her body, Emilia's violet eyes slowly focused onto him.

[Emilia: Um.....huh? Why, am I.....]

[Subaru: Take it slow, Emilia-tan. Just put the little confusing things in the back of your mind for now and take a deep breath. Then move your arms and legs a bit, see if they're numb, and try to stand up if you think you can stand]

[Emilia: Ah, e-enn alright.....]

Sensing the worry in his words as she woke, Emilia took a large deep breath as Subaru said. Then, moving her arms from her fingertips to her shoulders, she stood up with the help of Subaru's hand, and curiously looked around in the darkness,

[Emilia: In a dark place.....alone with Subaru and.....]

[Subaru: When you say it like that, it does kind of sound like a tantalizing situation, although the crap location's totally killing the mood here]

Seeing Emilia rushing to grasp the situation, Subaru scratched his face with a wry smile. In any case, the fact that it was the Tomb of a Witch pretty much ruined the mood for any lovers planning to sneak in.

But, hearing Subaru's words, Emilia suddenly hugged her own shoulders. Seeing this reaction, Subaru shuddered to himself [Crap I might've overdone it.....!]

[Emilia: That's, right.....I took the Trials, and then.....]

[Subaru: Oh, aah, that's right. This is inside the Witch's Tomb. I mean, I was worried to death there. A bit after Emilia-tan went in, the lights in the Tomb suddenly went out. So I panicked and ran in after you but.....]

[Emilia: a.....but.....no, that, I, didn't.....I didn't mean to, I didn't.....]

[Subaru: Emilia?]

There didn't seem to be anything wrong with her body—— but just as Subaru wanted to continue, he noticed that Emilia's voice was trembling, and her attitude was strange. Hugging her own shoulders as if she was cold, her teeth were clattering as she faintly shook her head.

[Emilia: I.....I didn't.....it's not like that.....th-that kind of.....I didn't.....I really didn't.....I told you it's not like that.....it's]

[Subaru: Emilia. Wait, Emilia? Calm down, what.....]

[Emilia:don't...at me.....with that kind of eyes.....don't, don't don't.....don't it's not like that.....why are... leaving me all alone.....please no.....]

Without hearing Subaru's calls, Emilia covered her palms over her face and fell to the ground. Her voice carried tears, and her trembling sobs, clear as silver chimes, would drown its listeners in heartache and sorrow.

The sight of her collapsed upon the floor stunned Subaru into silence, unable to utter a single word. Except,

[Subaru: It's alright. It's alright. I'm here. I'm here with you. I won't leave you alone]

Only, comforting the trembling, crying girl, protecting her, cherishing her, holding her entire body in his embrace, he kept on gently caressing her back.

All the while, as if not hearing Subaru's voice at all, Emilia hid her face behind her palms.

[Emilia:help, daddy. Help, me..... Puck, Puck.....pu...ck.....]

The name she kept on calling was not the boy at her side worrying over her, but the name of the Spirit who refused to show his face even while she was breaking down in tears.

[Ram: ——She's settled down and is resting now]

Seeing Subaru looking at her with an inquisitive gaze as she came out of the room, Ram returned a gaze as if looking at a poorly trained dog, and said this.

Without even a comment about her demeaning gaze, Subaru quietly replied [Is that so].

Seeing him this way, Ram let out a small sigh,

[Ram: That face isn't like you, Barusu. Your face is usually sloppy to begin with, but if you cast that shadow on it, it will become even less tolerable to look at]

[Subaru: Sloppy or whatever is none of your business.....But, I'm sorry I got you worried]

[Ram:You're just a Barusu, when did you start getting so good at noticing other people's worries?]

Seeing Ram look as if she was genuinely surprised, Subaru stuck out his tongue and withheld his earlier gratitude for now. He had said the first half of that with his eyes squeezed shut just to blast back at Ram, but the second half had been his true feelings. Taking his eyes off of Ram, Subaru looked behind her——at the door to the room Ram had just come out of. Beyond it, right now, Emilia must be sleeping.

[Subaru: Still, sorry this happened two days in a row, Lewes-san. It must have caused you trouble too]

[Lewes: There's no need to worry about causing me trouble. It was because of our selfish wish that she had to take the Trials in the first place]

Turning his head around, Lewes' even voice answered Subaru from behind. Outside the bedroom, the room they were currently in could be considered a living room of sorts. Other than these two rooms, there was only another room for the library, and the three together made up Lewes' home.

Subaru couldn't help but feel that it was an awfully modest life for someone who was practically the village chief of the Sanctuary. But then again, looking at the little girl sipping on tea in the corner of the room, it was probably more than enough space for her to live in. Anyways,

[Garfiel: Hah, look at'ya, granny, lookin' out for 'em. Honestly for me, all feels like "Th'presumptuous Gounzun got no place t'live"]

[Subaru: I still have absolutely no idea what feeling you're talking about.....but, at least the fact that it isn't good got across]

Seated across from Lewes, also gulping down tea from a teacup, Garfiel bared his teeth as he said this. It was another incomprehensible idiom——but judging from the current situation, Subaru guessed it was probably something about disappointment. And, picking up the intention behind Garfiel's words,

[Subaru: Just so you know, if you're planning to badmouth Emilia, you'll have to make an appointment through me first. And only if I approve it, as her Manager and all]

[Garfiel: I ain't interested in badmouthin' people behind their backs. Not th'kinda prick who'd do that. If I got somethin I wanna say, I say it to their face. Or I'd just use my fists, yeah?]

Waving his other hand that wasn't holding the teacup, Garfiel brushed off Subaru's provocation with a vicious-looking smile. That attitude didn't reduce Subaru's tension in the slightest, and it was at this point when the person who had stayed silent up to now——Otto, raised his hand with a [So um...]

[Otto: In that case, can I just ask what exactly happened? I honestly don't want to get involved too much, but I would really prefer if things don't go down this perilous direction, so I think I better act as an arbiter to help move things along]

[Subaru: Oh right, my bad. In fact, you're perfect for the job. After all, you don't have any deep relationships with anyone present, you barely have anything to do with what's going on here and you're pretty much a minor comic relief character who isn't carrying out any responsibilities in particular at the moment. I'll let you take it from here]

[Otto: What's with that rock-pulverizing review!? Is that something you're supposed to say when you're letting someone else take over!?!]

As Otto started shrieking at Subaru's description, Subaru held a finger to his lips in a gesture to say "Not too loud". Seeing this, Otto hurriedly closed his mouth. Still not quite settled down, he shook his head,

[Otto: Aah~, even though I'm still not ok with that, let's move on for now. First thing I want to ask you, Natsuki-san, is what happened after you went in the Tomb?]

[Subaru: Even if you ask me what happened.....]

Starting off like this, Subaru brought a hand to his chin and looked up at the ceiling.

In his mind, he went over all the things that had happened inside the Tomb——The Trial, and the strange way Emilia had behaved afterward: the sight of her inconsolable crying, apologizing, as if muttering in her sleep, and calling the name of that Spirit.

[Subaru: The Trials were definitely going on inside the Tomb. After I ran in after Emilia, the same thing happened to me. Basically, I got through the Trial without any problems, but Emilia seems to have encountered some difficulties. It looked like she was in too much pain, so I called out to her.....and after she woke up and regained consciousness, she became like this]

[Otto: Nonononononononono, wait a minute]

Flapping his hands up and down to stop Subaru's rapid-fire answer, Otto stared at him with a baffled expression. Subaru stared back at him with a face that seemed to say "what", when Otto started going [Nononono] again,

[Otto: I almost kept nodding when you just casually glossed over the part that totally needed an explanation..... Natsuki-san, you took the Trials as well?]

[Subaru: Ah, uh-huh, yeah, I took it. A friend signed me up, what can I do]

[Otto: But, Natsuki-san couldn't possibly have any friends, please take this more seriously]

[Subaru: There are some things that are totally not ok to say to people!]

Subaru started staring daggers at Otto as a declaration of war when an arm suddenly came in between them. Moving the two apart, Ram looked up at Subaru,

[Ram: Then, Barusu, you have passed the Trial. Is that correct?]

[Subaru: Ah, yeah. That's right. I got forcibly dragged in when I went inside. It wasn't really on a level where I could say no]

[Ram: How you started it is irrelevant. The more important question is.....did Barusu already pass the Trials]

Ram placed a finger to her lips and closed her eyes in thought. Then, looking toward Lewes,

[Ram: That's what our household's scullery boy said, do you sense any changes? If the Trials really are over, the seal on the Sanctuary should be lifted]

[Lewes:No, my body didn't feel anything in particular. If we actually try going outside the Sanctuary, though, that might be a different story.

[Ram: Is that so. Then it should be simple. Would you please come with Ram, we could check if it's alright to leave the Sanctuary. If we can, then.....]

[Subaru: Oyoyoy, don't get carried away. You're jumping to conclusions here. Yeah I didn't explain it well enough, but that kind of split-second decisions is just overdoing it here]

Just as Ram was about to pull Lewes away, Subaru quickly caught her by the shoulder, saying this. The pink haired girl's brows creased with displeasure as she turned around, and with [What is it?], she immediately recovered her expression.

[Ram: If you have successfully brought an end to the Trials, we must check whether the residents have been liberated in accordance with the Pact. If Barusu's words are true, by tomorrow, the villagers of Arlam would be able to return to the village, and Roswaal-sama's wounds could be better addressed inside the Mansion.....]

[Subaru: After your true motivation slipped out at the end there I can see why you're so eager to get going.....sorry I got your hopes up, but we can't leave the Sanctuary yet. The Trials still hasn't completely ended]

After being told this, Ram's eyes opened just slightly wider. Then she looked away, thinking over the meaning of Subaru's words, and as if having arrived at the only possible conclusion, she nodded,

[Ram: You lied to me, prepare to die]

[Subaru: That conclusion and sentencing was way too fast!!]

Immediately pulling out a small cane, Ram was ready to perform summary execution. Holding up both his hands to surrender, Subaru frantically shook his head,

[Subaru: Besides I wasn't lying! I did pass the first Trial! But there are still two more Trials left! There are three Trials in total, so unfortunately Lewes-san and everyone else are still not released yet]

[Ram: Even this kind of irresponsible remark should have a limit..... just how do you know this?]

[Subaru: Because, I heard it from the one who came up with the Trials, the——]

“Witch”, was the word Subaru was about to say when he felt a chill running through his entire body.

Petrified, his limbs felt heavy as if they had been burdened with lead, his thoughts dulled as if his brain was being drowned in mud, and his arteries froze as if they had been injected with ice.

All the while, within Subaru's mind, there was nothing but an idiotic blank void.

The contents of the Trial, and the fact that two more Trials were awaiting him: he knew that someone had told him. That it was a Witch. But,

[Subaru: What was that person like, I can't remember at all.....]

Pressing his temples, Subaru couldn't believe the gap in his memory.

He could remember all of the conversations with his parents, the heat of his tears, and the

warmth of every word he had left behind on their parting.

But his memories of the Witch who tied all these other memories together were abruptly missing like a gaping hole.

Seeing Subaru closing his mouth and standing there dumbstruck, Ram, who was just about ready to dish out destruction, got out of her battle stance. Putting the cane she had pulled out back onto her hip, she shot a glance at the silenced Subaru, and sighed. And, watching her from the side,

[Garfiel: Aeh? Just when things were gettin' interestin, ain't ya gonna keep goin? After so long, was just thinkin when I'd get to see Ram violent again]

[Ram: As if the graceful and gentle Ram could possibly do such brutish things. Besides, I more or less understood based on Barusu's attitude just now, so there's no need for that]

[Subaru: Understood... what?]

Lightly brushing off Garfiel's joke, Ram didn't seem to pay him any mind. But, hearing Subaru's question, Ram slightly tilted her head.

[Ram: That Barusu wasn't lying, that's all. If we can accept your words as credible, then that's good enough for now. Barusu, go on answering Otto's questions]

[Subaru: Ah, aah.....alright but]

It was still a bit hard to wrap his head around it, but in front of Ram's forceful attitude, Subaru could only nod his head. And Otto, who had been watching their exchange, lightly cleared his throat with [In that case],

[Otto: Even though we got derailed for a bit, let's get back on topic. The details of the Trials could be set aside for now.....Do you have any idea what could've made Emilia-sama so distraught?]

[Subaru:I do. It's probably to do with the content of the Trial. Even though the details of the Trial I took and the one Emilia took are different, I think the main theme is same]

[Otto: The contents.....Um, would it be alright to ask about those?]

Otto seemed concerned, but Subaru held up a palm gesturing that it's fine. Seeing Ram and Garfiel turning their eyes towards him as well, Subaru nodded,

[Subaru: The first Trial is to face your past. Basically, it's to come face to face with your past attachments and regrets, and come to some sort of resolution]

[Otto: I, I see..... and that's why the details would be different]

Obviously, everyone had a different past.

So, depending on the person, this Trial could be difficult or simple. Subaru just happened to hit the mark, whereas Emilia had taken a critical setback——

[Subaru: No, if we take the Qualifications into account, then the contents of the Trials are obviously just plain malicious]

After all, Subaru's Qualification was specially granted, while the Half-Bloods were born with them. Even though he didn't know the true purpose of the Trials, the stories behind the Half-Bloods would have been determined by the various conditions and restraints attached to their birth.

They would have been persecuted by other races as well as their own, been terrorized and shunned, and if the Halves who would have had to endure such conditions were selected to take the Trials, then, of course, the Tomb would easily find their most painful pasts to test them.

[Subaru: To gather a bunch of guys here who would certainly have trouble passing the Trials. That really is blackhearted]

[Otto: Right now, even if we keep calling the examiner names for being mean, we won't really get anywhere. More importantly.....it will be hard to bring it up to her, the reason why Emilia-sama is so distraught, that is]

Otto mumbled as he turned his eyes toward the bedroom where Emilia was sleeping. Watching him, everyone more or less understood what he was trying to say, and, deep down, Subaru appreciated Otto's unspoken consideration.

——Emilia's appearance resembled the description of the Witch of Envy in so many ways on top being a Half-Elf. From that alone one should be able to infer some sense of the baseless scorn and persecution she must have endured.

And naturally, having never actually been in her position, what Subaru and the others were able to imagine could only be barely scratching the surface.

And that is why they could not bring up this topic lightly. One could say that Otto's judgment was awfully humane, or, on the other hand, that his personality was fatally unsuited for a merchant.

[Subaru: Even though you can never, ever, become a great merchant, you have my gratitude]

[Otto: Why are you just shattering my dreams all of a sudden!?!]

[Subaru: I'm usually too embarrassed to straight-up express my gratitude without spiking it with a joke, try to understand]

[Otto: How about you try to understand how deeply my heart just got wounded!!]

With Otto blasting that out while stomping on the floor, everyone else in the room put their fingers up to their lips gesturing "Not too loud!". Seeing this, Otto hurriedly blocked his own mouth, but it was too late.

At first, there was a just small sound.

In the house that fell completely silent after Otto shut himself up, the sound of small steps striking upon the floor grew louder, and louder. Everyone turned their gazes toward the direction of the sound——toward the direction of the bedroom.

And before anyone could open their mouths, the door opened, and,

[Emilia: Um.....I'm sorry I, caused you guys trouble]

Saying that quiet apology, Emilia, with her silver hair flowing down her back, emerged out of the room.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief when they saw that there was no longer any trace of distress in her words. And Subaru quickly jogged over to her side,

[Subaru: Thank god, good morning, Emilia-tan. Are you feeling better now?]

[Emilia: Ah. En, I'm fine. My body feels completely fine now. Sorry I made you worry]

[Subaru: I see, that's good. You know, since I wasn't with you when you fell down, I was really worried if maybe you bumped into something. So you see, the only way we won't have to worry about each other is if I never leave your side]

[Emilia: ——yeah, I guess you're right]

[Subaru: Yeah?]

Already preparing his posture for some kind of comeback to his joke, Subaru slightly furrowed his brows at Emilia's unexpected reply. Her eyes were lowered, and were staring at Subaru's hand. Wondering what it might be, Subaru tilted his head, and held his hand out to her.

[Subaru: What is it? Maybe you suddenly miss the feeling of my palm? If that's the case, I can hold your hand all night long if you want]

[Emilia: Eh, ah.....I-I'm alright. That's not it. I'm just kind of, still half asleep]

Just before touching Subaru's outstretched palm, as if suddenly remembering something, Emilia shook her head. And as her last word fell, the girl in maid's uniform walked over,

[Ram: Emilia-sama. More than anything, it's wonderful that you've woken up safely. If possible, please don't overexert yourself, and tell me how you're really feeling]

[Subaru: Oy. You're making it sound as if Emilia's hesitating to tell me the truth or something]

[Ram: In front of someone who isn't a fellow woman, or should I say a guy who's always trying to show off, there are certain things that one might find hard to say. Please show enough consideration to notice that and get out of the room]

[Subaru: I wish I could show that kind of consideration but.....]

While Ram was giving him a sharp glare, Subaru's words suddenly trailed off as he dropped down his eyes. Ram furrowed her brows at this, but soon seemed to understand when she followed Subaru's gaze downward...

...to see the tips of Emilia's white fingers——timidly wrapping onto Subaru's hand, that was dangling at his side.

[Emilia: Eh, ah!]

Late to notice Subaru and Ram' meaningful gazes, Emilia quickly let go of his hand. Her cheeks blushing bright red as if everything she did just now had been unconscious, she started panicking,

[Emilia: N-not like that. That was really weird, ok? I, really didn't mean to do that.....because, I already decided I wouldn't, you know]

[Subaru: Yeah you did draw it back at first, and then grabbed my hand anyway. I liked it so I won't complain, but, are you really alright, Emilia-tan?]

Asking this question with still some lingering yearning for the fingertips that had been pulled away, he saw Emilia firmly nodding her head up and down. Her cheeks were still blushing red, but even Subaru could sense that it was no longer due to embarrassment. However, Emilia didn't seem to notice that there was anything strange about her, [Emilia: I'm sorry I interrupted your conversations. But, I really don't feel like there's anything wrong with my body. I was a bit half-asleep before, but I'm fully awake now and fit as a fiddle]

[Subaru: It's been a long time since I heard someone say "fit as a fiddle"]

[Emilia: Hmph, Subaru's always like that]

After their old back and forth, as always, Emilia puffed up her cheeks pouting. Seeing her behave just the same as usual, Subaru wondered if he was simply thinking too much into it, and put aside his worries for the time being. But,

[Ram: Emilia-sama. Sorry to bring this up so soon after you have woken up, but, about the Trial.....]

[Emilia: ——h]

Even though Emilia seemed to have recovered sooner than anyone expected, the moment Ram mentioned the Trial, Emilia's face tensed up. Subaru, who was watching her intently, noticed this momentary change, but by the next instant, she had already hidden it behind a smile.

[Emilia: So.....um, everyone already knows about the Trial's contents?]

[Ram: We heard it from Barusu. Of course, we didn't get into any details. Emilia-sama, we realize there must be things you would rather not be asked about]

[Emilia: I, I see, Subaru.....eh? How could Subaru...? I mean, Subaru isn't Half-Blooded, how could he take the Trials.....]

Surprised, Emilia looked toward Subaru, and, as if with the same question, everyone else fixed their eyes onto Subaru as well. It was only natural they would ask this, and receiving their gazes, Subaru thought for a moment about how he should answer,

[Subaru: I told you before I went in. I got the Qualifications. Who it came from is a bit hard to explain, but I could tell you where.....it was, probably when I went into the Tomb the evening before]

[Garfiel: By evening, y'mean when you suddenly went fainted and I had to drag you all th'way here?]

[Subaru: Yeah, that's right. I'm not sure exactly how or why I got it.....but that should've been it. Maybe when a guy without Qualifications walks in, he gets baptized or something, and afterwards he'll be allowed to go in. Wouldn't it be a surprise if Roswaal could go in too?]

[Garfiel: Let's send Roswaal in t'check, it'll be hilarious watchin' him bouncin out. Be just like checkin' if "Purinpas' blood drips the same shade o'red"]

Garfiel opened his mouth laughing, but as soon as he saw Ram's cold stare, he made a "you're no fun" face and closed his mouth. And then, although Ram still didn't seem convinced by Subaru's answer,

[Ram: In any case, it's a fact that Barusu went in and brought Emilia-sama out, and during that time, took the same kind of Trial as Emilia-sama did, and, if his words weren't entirely delusional, managed to pass it]

[Subaru: Delusional... that hurts, oy]

[Emilia: Managed to pass it..... Subaru, passed the Trial?]

While Subaru was complaining about Ram's merciless word choice, Emilia's ears didn't seem to catch the rest of that interaction. With flickering eyes, she looked at Subaru, and,

[Emilia: You really passed it, Subaru? The.....past?]

[Subaru: The one I saw would've been different from Emilia-tan's. Besides I.....couldn't have done it on my own]

His mother and father, who should have been the obstacles in his path, instead gave him the greatest encouragement in the end. And, more importantly, even before challenging the Trial, Subaru's heart already had the answers.

Although it was unfair to Emilia, they had gone into their Trials with very different conditions.

[Subaru: I just lucked out and got a nice test result, that's all. I'm more concerned about Emilia-tan, though. From the looks of it, I guess your Trial didn't go too well.....]

[Emilia: E-en. That's right..... I tried my best, but it suddenly broke off half way through]

[Subaru: That was probably because I woke you up, I think, sorry..... But then, is re-taking the Trials even possible? Instead of continuing to the other two Trials, I just got sent back here]

Listening to Emilia's faltering words, Subaru turned to Lewes and asked this question. Sitting there quietly in the corner, the old hag who looked like a little girl touched a hand to her cheek.

[Lewes: There weren't many precedents but.....you should be able to challenge multiple times. I myself did not pass beyond the first Trial, but I challenged twice. What bothers me the most, though, is Su-bo, who received the Qualifications]

[Subaru: Me?]

[Lewes: Suddenly becoming qualified out of the blue should not be possible. At least, as far as I know, having been here since the time when the Tomb was first created.....it

shouldn't be. But I might have a rough idea] (****Lewes said before that she wasn't around when the Tomb was first created, but this time she is explicitly saying that she is. – TC*)

After that, Lewes fell silent. Even though he felt something was off about Lewes' words and demeanor, Subaru kept it to himself for the moment, and turned to Emilia,

[Subaru: Either way, it's officially confirmed that it's possible to re-take the Trials. So now, it's just a question of Emilia-tan]

[Emilia: M-me?]

[Subaru: Yeah, that's right. I just have to ask——Emilia-tan, do you still have the resolve to challenge the Trials again?]

[Emilia: ————h]

At that question, Emilia's throat clogged up and her eyes opened wide.

If she became angry at her determination being called into question, or if she felt insulted and indignant, Subaru was prepared to be yelled at and to take on her reproach.

However, within her trembling, violet eyes, there was only a faint flicker of anxiety and fear.

Her heart being eaten away by these negative emotions was such that she could not give an immediate reply.

[Subaru: If you can't take the Trials, I will take them for you]

[Emilia: ——!? But Subaru, that's.....]

[Subaru: At least I've already cleared the first Trial. That means breaking through the other two Trials won't be impossible either. So, if you're having any second thoughts about going back into the Trials, I will gallantly do it for you. It's the reason I am here, after all]

[Emilia: For a reason like that.....for, me.....?]

[Subaru: Of course]

Emilia faltered as if she was preparing to be denied, but Subaru answered her loud and clear.

Watching her eyes widen as her emotions intensified, Subaru stared straight into her eyes,

[Subaru: I am here for you, and if you are scared, I will do it for you. Even if Roswaal or anyone else says that Emilia-tan has to be the one to liberate the Sanctuary, or that it has to be your achievement.....Whatever I achieve, whatever praise I might receive, I devote them all to you. So I don't mind]

[Emilia: Why would you.....do so much for me.....]

[Subaru: Didn't I tell you before? Because I fell in love with you, because I fell super in love with you]

Emilia's breath stopped, and the faces of everyone in the room showed some kind of reaction.

Subaru didn't pay them any mind, and only fixed his gaze on the shaken Emilia, and shrugged,

[Subaru: That's why, I plan to challenge the Trials. What about you, Emilia-tan? If it's really too hard, it's ok if you want to sleep in the house]

[Emilia: ———Subaru you, blockhead]

Seeing the corners of Subaru's lips drawing upward, Emilia slightly pouted her lips.

Then, lifting up her downcast face, she forcefully wiped her eyes, and turned her lips into the shape of a smile.

[Emilia: When you say it like that, how can I just shut myself in a room and wait. You know..... you're reeeaaally unfair. Reeeaaally dumb. And I reeeaaally..... thank you]

[Subaru: Eh? Wha? What was that last one? You reeeaaally love me too?]

[Emilia: Totally wrong! I was gonna say I'm really grateful and.....]

[Subaru: Oh. I see. Even though I heard it this time, can I just hear it one more time please!]

[Emilia: Subaru you blockhead!!]

Getting carried away, Subaru held his ear right up to her, when Emilia shouted back at the top of her lungs.

Even if her voice was as beautiful as silver chimes, with a direct hit on his eardrums at this volume, it was nothing less than a sonic weapon. Subaru looked like he was about to pass out, but still managed to throw Emilia a smile as she huffed her shoulders up and down.

[Subaru: See, that's more like it. Alright, then let's give it our best again. I'll start on Stage 2, Emilia-tan on Stage 1]

[Emilia: Hrmph. I'll catch up before you know it, then I'll just keep going, and I'll be sure to leave you way behind in the dust. Subaru's achievements or whatever, I won't leave you a single one]

[Subaru: Not a single one? But I'll need at least one for a chance to come bother Emilia-tan for a reward or two afterwards]

Seeing Subaru still not learning his lesson, Emilia pouted up her lips and poked out her tongue.

During this back and forth between them, Subaru wondered if he had managed to help just a little in getting her back on her feet.

One way or another, the real Trials are only beginning.

[Subaru: With me and Emilia-tan's Love-Love-Power, the Trials or whatever will be a piece of cake]

Clicking his fingers and sparkling his teeth, Subaru expressed his resolution by striking a thumbs-up.

Listening to his words, Emilia only stuck out her tongue, and,

[Emilia: It's more than enough with just me. Tomorrow I'll show you, I can do it on my own without Subaru looking after me]

And, this way, she kept up her strong facade in front of him.

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Watching Subaru and Emilia taunting each other and pumping each other up, Lewes brought the already cold tea up to her lips.

Tasting its faint, lingering warmth on the tip of her tongue, she fondly watched the conversation between the silver-haired Half-Elf and the black-haired youth.

[Lewes: Where will things go from here, I wonder..... Would everything really happen as Witch-sama intended?]

[Garfiel: Kheh. Who knows. No matter which way it turns, I a'ready know it'll be something that'll make me wanna puke]

Listening to Lewes' mutterings, Garfiel replied in a voice that didn't intend to hide his displeasure.

Watching the side of the youth's face, Lewes quietly sighed in a way that no one else could have noticed,

[Lewes: To force such burdens on these kind children. How egregious the sins of this ancient self must be..... We are beyond redemption. ——At least, I hope it doesn't come to that in the end]

Tilting the tea to her lips, those words fell without having reached anyone, and only stirred up a small wave on the surface of the lukewarm amber-colored tea —— which, too, vanished without a trace.

Chapter 22 [Weakness]

——Subaru woke in the darkness and slowly sat himself up.

Pulling aside the thin blanket covering over his body, he did a light stretch while taking care not to make any noise. Pressing back a yawn and turning his neck about, he could hear a multitude of snoring around him.

Although he had been sleeping in a corner of a crowd of sleepers scattered all over the floor, Subaru appeared to be the only one who was awake. It was only natural—— the sky was still dark outside the great window of the Cathedral, and it was not yet the hour for the Sun to show its face.

Even though he couldn't tell the time without the convenience of a clock, it was clearly still middle of the night, and not an hour suitable for human activity. Usually, he'd keep sleeping even after the sun came up, but,

[Subaru: I went to bed too early and now I couldn't fall asleep, huh..... makes me miss the days when I get to slack off whenever I have time]

Roughly scratching his head, Subaru folded his blanket, and quietly pulled himself out of bed.

The masses of people sleeping around him——were the refugees from Arlam village, currently confined along with Roswaal within the Sanctuary.

Subaru had given up his place in the small residence allotted to him, and decided to pass the night here in their company. The reason, was not so complicated.

Inside the Cathedral, the people had given Subaru a spot in the corner behind the front wall. It was probably because they were looking out for him, that they gave him in such a comfortable spot. On the other hand, if there was just one downside, it would've probably been the fact that all the children were also bunched around him.

But then again, the children liked Subaru, so naturally they came snuggling next to him, and while the adults remained in a state of confinement, he thought it would be best to

lighten the burden of the children as much as possible. So he had no complaints once he thought about it that way.

[Subaru: It really isn't like me to be thinking about these kinds of things, is it]

He couldn't help but smile at himself bitterly for becoming so considerate all of a sudden. After all, life's no fun if you get too hung up about such complicated things.

Being careful not to wake the children, who were noisily sleeping in full-force, Subaru passed through the mire of sleeping villagers instead on his way out of the Cathedral—— A damp wind came greeting him as he went out; the lukewarm air was neither warm nor cold, and only managed to add to his discomfort-index.

Looking up, the thick clouds that had lined up in the sky had covered over the pleasing radiance of the previous night's stars. The layers upon layers of clouds moved rapidly along with the wind. He wasn't sure if the weather would turn, but it was unlikely that it would be a clear day ahead.

[Subaru: Come to think of it, I haven't encountered a drop of rain since I got here. Going by what everyone said, I would imagine there's something like seasons here]

He seemed to remember hearing at some point that the seasons here were split into "Red-Sun, Blue-Sun, Yellow-Sun, and Green-Sun", each matching a magical element type.

If these were like the seasons of the original world, perhaps there would be a "rainy season" somewhere in there as well. The temperatures were neither too hot nor too cold right now, and the feeling of the wind precisely matched his impression of the days that preceded the summer rains.

[Subaru: During the rainy seasons, it's always a headache that the laundry wouldn't dry. The ten-thousand-year futon is in a precarious situation to begin with, if it doesn't get dried in the sun on the occasional holiday we'll be in trouble.....but then again, every day was a holiday for me]

Basically, since he was always on the futon, there was no chance to actually dry the futon. Occasionally, his mother would run out of patience and roll Subaru off the futon and snatch it from him, and then offer it up to the fragrant rays of Mr.Sun-sama, as was the Natsuki-family way.

Reminiscing on those nostalgic days, Subaru loosened up the different parts of his body with the usual radio-calisthenics. The great Cathedral, true to its name, was an enormous building covering over a huge plot of land, and even with the sleepers all strewn about the floor, there was still enough room for each person to stretch their limbs. Blankets had been distributed to everyone as well, so there were no complaints in that regard.

If there was anything he was dissatisfied with, it would have been a question of luxury, as having to sleep on the hard floor had been putting pressure on several points in his body. [Subaru: I miss my old flattened futon, or the fluffy bed in the mansion. But it's only my fourth or fifth day, just imagine what the other people must feel about having to sleep like this all this time]

Even though everyone acted like they were in high spirits in front of Subaru, it was undeniable that their faces were growing more burdened with each passing day. At mealtimes and the likes, Subaru would fool around and rouse up their smiling faces, but other than that, everyone rarely spoke, most likely because of the stress.

After an evacuation they didn't wish for, they had become imprisoned in their place of refuge. The

Lord to whom they had originally directed their discontent was already wounded on their behalf, and so, more than discontent about their present situation, the sentiment among the villagers' was closer to anxiety regarding their future.

Since Subaru was technically a part of the Lord's faction, it wouldn't have come as a surprise if the villagers blamed him for their plight, but——

[Subaru: They didn't even blame me like I expected. It's really a failure on the leadership's part to have to depend on the good sensibility of its people like this]

The truth is, the main reason the villagers didn't turn on Subaru was because they still felt a strong sense of gratitude and indebtedness toward him.

It's just that Subaru himself didn't think so highly of his own achievements, so he was still under the impression that the refugees were just simple-minded.

But,

[Subaru: I can't get used to living off of everyone's good graces like this]

——Subaru and the others have already entered their sixth day since they arrived at the Sanctuary.

The refugees had arrived almost a week before Subaru did, so they have actually already spent nearly two weeks in captivity.

They have already heard from Subaru how the people who evacuated to the Capital had returned safely, so there wasn't too much worry about their separated family members, but having nothing to do for two weeks was beginning to take a mental toll.

Moreover, it was only a matter of time before the sympathy generated by Roswaal's yolo-self-destruct-battle-plan wore off.

When that time comes, the villagers and the locals would be on a course set to collide, and that was something he mustn't allow, if he wished to obtain the support of both sides.

[Subaru: In fact, I'm stuck. What should I do.....]

[???: ——That's far'nough right there, not another step, yeah?]

While he was shaking his head worrying, he was stopped mid-step by a shout.

Subaru froze in his posture with one foot off the ground, and looked around by turning his eyes with his head still halfway through a headshake. Within his field of vision, there was nothing but trees in the vast darkness that shrouded over the forest.

Wandering not far from the vicinity of the Cathedral, the one Subaru found was,

[Garfiel: Takin' a stroll so early in th'morning? Can't tell if y'got a nice hobby or if you're just in a laid-back mood. Feels like "Mujigemujige gettin' lost between the red and green berries" here]

Muttering another one of his usual idioms that didn't sound familiar at all, above Subaru's head—the golden haired youth leapt off of a branch, and flew down.

All short hair standing on end, Garfiel landed on all four limbs upon the grass without making a sound, and closed one of his eyes as he looked up at Subaru,

[Garfiel: You don't look too surprised. Then where's the fun in scaring ya?]

[Subaru: I might have been scared if I didn't think I'd run into you, but I had a feeling I'd find you if I wandered around here. Didn't expect you to come from up in the trees though]

[Garfiel: You were lookin' for me?]

Looking skeptical, Garfiel stood up, facing against Subaru who was a half a head taller than he was. Subaru straightened up his chest rather pointlessly, and replied [Uh-huh],

[Subaru: I thought it was too early and the chances wouldn't be very good, but I'm glad I bumped into you..... Just curious though, why did you want to scare me?]

[Garfiel: It's no big deal. Ahead from here, that side of the forest's my huntin' ground. If you get y'rself lost in there I might end up crunchin' on your neck, that's all]

[Subaru: Don't just say that like it's no big deal! That was totally a big deal!]

Shocked by how casually Garfiel let that frightening information slip, Subaru's indignant protest resounded outwards...

...ripping through the silence of the forest in between the dawn and the dark of night, sending the sleeping birds and beasts scurrying in retreat.

[Garfiel:Tch. Oy, you just scared'em all away, what'm I gonna eat now?]

[Subaru: They're a bunch cowards. If you eat wimpy guys like that you'll only absorb their weakness anyway. ——is one way to think about it, so how about we just magnanimously let that slide this time]

[Garfiel: Or how 'bout I make all the meat disappear from your plate from this day onwards to make up for it]

[Subaru: I'm sorry! I didn't mean to! Please forgive me! Today I'll go fishing with Otto down by the river and make it up to you!]

There wasn't much for a merchant to do in these last few days, so Otto took up fishing, and had been heading to the river every day. Unfortunately, all his customers were about 5 centimeters long, so he had pretty much been giving away free bait for nothing, which seemed just like something Otto would do.

Hearing Otto's name come up, Garfiel smirked up the corner of his mouth and bared his fangs,

[Garfiel: Hah, that lil'bro's got such abysmal luck it doesn't even make sense. Not like his head's dumb or anything. But he's just like how "Even the sky bewails how sensitive Denzen's to the rain", yeah?]

[Subaru: Well I say he's a UNIQUE-CHARACTER that's here to liven up the mood, something that should be a part of every household, and pretty good for bouncing jokes off of. He's also saved my ass quite a few times..... but he's mostly for livening up the mood, though]

If Otto was around to hear that, he would probably be protesting with tears in his eyes about the merciless review he got.

Listening to these not-exactly-flattering compliments, Garfiel scratched his ear with a finger, muttering [Livenin' up the mood huh.....],

[Garfiel: Then, how's the livenin' up workin' out for ya?]

[Subaru: What d'you mean?]

[Garfiel: Don't play dumb. It's pretty obvious th'fellas in Cathedral're almost at their limits. Don't need me to tell ya this, but you and the lil'bro can't keep'em distracted forever]

[Subaru: You got me where it hurts there...you know, you're surprisingly observant sometimes]

Garfiel had caught on to Subaru's concerns precisely. Receiving this unexpected compliment from Subaru, Garfiel crunched up his nose,

[Garfiel: Caus'of all kinds of reasons, I got to be the one who gets to see those Cathedral guys the most. After all, the other guys includin' the granny barely would even show their face. Naturally, this's how it turned out]

[Subaru: To think you're actually the guy preparing the meals for us. The first time I saw that I thought there was something wrong with my eyes for a second]

[Garfiel: If you want the food to taste the way you want it, you gotta have t'do it yourself. Anyway, I'm not talkin' about that]

Taking a step forward, Garfiel raised up a single finger in front of Subaru's face,

[Garfiel: The hostage fellas're close to their limit. ——How long are you gonna keep up this pointless struggle for?]

[Subaru: Pointless struggle... I don't know what you mean.....]

[Garfiel: Hah. Y'got some guts t'say that. What else you gonna call it besides pointless strugglin'? ——You've already been stuck in the same place for three goddamn days]

Noticing Subaru's tone weaken, Garfiel sneered back at him through the gaps between his teeth. Subaru opened his mouth wanting to refute him, but, unable to think of anything off the top of his head, no words came out.

Seeing him like this, a tinge of disappointment emerged in Garfiel's narrowed, emerald-green eyes.

[Garfiel: Cough it up. What're y'really thinkin'? Gonna wait till I cut open your gut before ya talk?]

[Subaru: Talking about cutting open guts kind of brings back some bad memories for me, so I'd prefer if you don't phrase it like that.....although, judging by the atmosphere, you might not be joking]

Garfiel was slouching down his already short body. Although his attitude wasn't hostile, an unearthly aura of rage was emanating from his entire body.

While it was physical and direct, Subaru didn't feel the need to worry about its violence being directed toward him. However——

[Subaru: First, let's just be clear on this. I'm on Emilia's side. I have total faith in her, without the slightest doubt. So I believe without a doubt that even if it takes time, Emilia will break through the Trials]

[Garfiel: As if I'd believe that tall-tale at this point. Your sheltered Princess-sama—— already had to be pulled outa there crying three days in a row now, you honestly think she can do it?]

Their opinions were completely irreconcilable.

Garfiel's gaze held a sharpness that did not hide his contempt. While Subaru was at a disadvantage, he nonetheless tried to meet it by making his sanpaku eyes as sharp as he could——his feelings for Emilia would not allow him to lose.

This was the morning of the sixth day since Subaru and the others arrived in the Sanctuary. And three days had already passed since Subaru broke through the first Trial. If you were to ask what happened in that time, then——

[Garfiel: Never would've thought there'd be a restriction on starting the second Trial long as someone's stuck in the first one. Thanks t' that, the Trials' not made a bit'of progress in three damn days]

[Subaru: —————]

[Garfiel: If we knew it was gonna be like this we might as well've sent you in alone, yeah? That way, at least we won't be trippin' over the same rock y'already could'a stepped over]

Garfiel's words didn't conceal any of his bitterness—— but he was right. He had described the reality facing Subaru and Emilia exactly as it was.

Since Subaru passed the first Trial three days ago——there had been no progress made in the Trials of the Tomb. The reason was simple.

Emilia was still in the first Trial. That is, she still couldn't overcome her past.

[Subaru: The past that needs to be resolved is different for everyone. Unlike me, who got to live a carefree life, obviously she'd be weighed down by all sorts of things. So I don't think of her as a burden at all]

[Garfiel: That so? Y're just bein' gentle with the one you've got a thing for. But d'you think anyone else cares about her like you do? Honestly, my opinion of Princess-sama's been droppin down'n'down'n'down, even as we speak]

[Subaru: That's.....]

[Garfiel: It's 'bout time you admitted it. If we get rid of Princess-sama, at least you can get your ass into the second Trial. That way, 'least we'd be doin' something real about freein' this place, anyone can figure out that much]

Garfiel's made it sound easy——but it was a decision that would mean trampling on Emilia's resolve.

It would mean abandoning the bulk of Roswaal's designs, and tarnishing that pristine

nobility of Emilia's heart which Subaru believed in. No matter what, will not agree to it. But, what made Subaru hesitate instead of firmly shaking his head was, [Subaru: If only there was time, she can definitely get through it. There wouldn't be any need to rush her or hurry her. But.....]

[Garfiel: Even you can see that time's not something we have, right? Beginnin' with me, our short-tempered guys in the Sanctuary are startin' to run out'of patience, and the hostage-fellas aren't gonna take much longer of bein' caged-in. ——It's only a matter of time before th'growin' discontent bursts, don't y'think?]

——In the end, it was all a problem of limited time.

No matter what kind of "Past" Emilia must face, Subaru had no doubt that she will overcome it in the end. But it takes time to defeat such deep-rooted wounds. If Subaru could help, he'd have the spirit to challenge anything in the face of all hardships. But the bygone "Past" existed only within her, and Subaru had no way to offer his outstretched hand. From Rem, Subaru had received the courage to face his past, and he couldn't help but wonder if somehow he could do the same for Emilia.

As long as there was time, she will be able to overcome the Trials. But right now, they didn't have the time for that.

Just as Garfiel pointed out, the two groups inside the Sanctuary were both nearing their limits while time was constantly draining away.

They mustn't wait any longer. Therefore, Subaru came to a single conclusion.

[Subaru: ——I have, a proposal]

Touching his jaw, Subaru wrenched out these words between his lips.

Seeing the change in Subaru's expression, Garfiel closed one eye and twisted his mouth into the shape of smile.

[Garfiel: I'm all ears]

[Subaru: I think we can agree that the problem for both sides is time. I have faith in Emilia to pass the Trials, but to do it she needs time. On the other hand, you guys are right on the verge of the time limit before balance collapses. No problems so far?]

[Garfiel: Nothin' wrong so far. If I just got one thing to add, I honestly doubt Princess-sama will end up passin' the Trials, or if she's even capable of it]

[Subaru:I think we should just reserve our own opinions on that part. Either way, if we can both agree that time will become the bottleneck, then you should be interested to hear my proposal]

Listening to Subaru's case, Garfiel touched the white scar on his forehead without saying a word. Sensing that Garfiel was beckoning him to continue, Subaru returned a nod, and,

[Subaru: Right now, the imprisoned refugees are at the end of their ropes. It won't be long before someone breaks, and in the worst case, there could be a clash between the factions inside the Sanctuary]

[Garfiel: Won't really worry to me if that happens? Even if there's a mob of a hundred or two villagers, I'll just be flippin'em all back, not much to it]

[Subaru: There's forty two.....and it's not a matter of what you'll do. I'm talking about an undesirable conflict, and the damage it would cause. I'm sure even you don't want to use violence on the people you've been making meals for every day, do you?]

[Garfiel: Well, y'got a point]

Turning his gaze away, Garfiel clicked his tongue somewhat awkwardly. From his reaction, Subaru could sense that Garfiel had some goodness inside, and secretly nodded in his heart.

[Subaru: So, to avoid such a conflict, I would like to request the release of the prisoners. As it is, I don't think they have any more value as hostages. What do you say?]

[Garfiel: Oyoy, hold it. This'n that're two different stories, aren't they? First tell me what y'mean they're no good as hostages?]

[Subaru: In the first place, the reason you imprisoned them was to lure us..... or rather, lure Emilia here, wasn't it? We already entered the Sanctuary as you intended, and began the Trials in accordance with your conditions. The food and care, and the need to watch over the hostages aren't free, and you don't have unlimited supply. In fact, the fact that you are diligently out here hunting at a time somewhere between night and dawn couldn't have nothing to do with it]

From what Subaru can see, the Sanctuary was a vast territory when including the forests, but only an extremely small portion of that was being used—— in fact, the number of Half-Bloods living in the Sanctuary was probably about the same as the number of refugees from Arlam village.

To put it simply, the food consumption within the Sanctuary would have been doubled from what it was before. Due to the special characteristics of the land, it was obviously unlikely that they'd be able to purchase any food from travelling traders, so their food could only be coming primarily from hunting and local produce. ——Therefore,

[Subaru: There's no need to keep holding onto hostages that'll only be a burden on your supplies. Even without the hostages, we already have no way to leave, now that we're half-way through the Trials]

[Garfiel: 'S that so. Either way, immediately upon entering the Sanctuary, the Half-..... Princess-sama would already've been bound by the curse of the land. If Princess-sama wants to leave, one way or another, the Trials will have to be overcome..... Ah, so that's how it is]

Saying this while digesting the meaning of Subaru's proposal, Garfiel nodded several times as his cheeks twisted into a cruel smile. Seeing him like this, Subaru understood

that he certainly wasn't slow in the head at all. Aside from his usual attitudes, if it was purely a matter of making decisions based on the facts, then,

[Garfiel: If we release the hostages, whether it's food supplies or th'internal rifts, we'll get t' avoid these unavoidable problems. That's the idea, yeah? In fact, looks like the only thing standin' in between the hostages and and outside world is ME, ain' it?]

[Subaru: If everything had been going along with your plans so far, wouldn't you prefer to let it carry on to the end? After all, your goal is to be released from the Sanctuary, not mutual destruction]

[Garfiel: Guess that's what it'd be if we respect the Granny's opinions..... Well, it's just details anyway]

With a wave of his hand, Garfiel took in Subaru's opinion for the time being.

Then, touching his jaw, he sank deep into thought,

[Garfiel: But why on earth'd you come talkin' to me? The head'of this place is Granny, not me? If you wanted someone to approve your idea, you coulda done better talkin' to Granny. Odd havin' t'say it myself, but, you do realize talkin' to me could just be makin' things more complicated?]

[Subaru: It's to keep things from getting complicated that I'm talking to you. If I properly explain all the pros and cons to Lewes-san, I think I could convince her. But if I do that, I still wouldn't know how you'd react]

If it was the rational and pragmatic Lewes, she would probably accept Subaru's proposal without any issues. In fact, Subaru was confident that he could convince her.

But when it came time to face Garfiel after concluding the high-level talks, then,

[Subaru: One way or another, convincing you is the hard part. Unfortunately, according to my self-assessments, I'll be totally helpless if you decide to use force. So I figured I should sort out the unpredictable factors first, so that I won't have to worry about them later]

[Garfiel: Ain't that a pretty clever way'of thinkin', oy. That's it, yeah? If you bring your proposal to Granny, I'll come screwin' it up, that it? You got somethin' you wanna say t'me? Wanna say it with my fist in your face, huh?]

[Subaru: We were just having a civilized conversation a few second ago, how did it suddenly go tumbling in that direction.....]

[Garfiel: I only get t'use my head for talkin' for three minutes, tops. You already gone over th'time limit, no point sayin' anythin' now]

[Subaru: Why are you saying that looking so smug!]

Garfiel held up his fists, and Subaru held up his hands to surrender. Of course, Garfiel wasn't being serious, and only sighed as if he was bored, and,

[Garfiel: Hah, gettin' hit with this stuff first thing in th'mornin'. Yeah, sure, do what y'want. If you can convince Granny, I won't say nothin'. They're a damn nuisance anyway. Do it however you like, long as you get rid of'em]

[Subaru: Is that so, then I'll take you up on that and.....]

[Garfiel: ——But, I got one condition]

Just as Subaru thought he had passed over the most unpredictable hurdle and was about to breathe a sigh of relief, Garfiel's words came down like a bucket of cold water. Seeing Subaru furrow his brows, Garfiel stuck out a single finger,

[Garfiel: Whether I accept your proposal is one thing. But if you don't accept mine, there's nothin' we got to talk about]

[Subaru:But this benefits on your end as well. There's food supplies, and you'll be avoiding infighting]

[Garfiel: Y'think either of those matters t'me? If we run out'a food for the hostages, we could always start cull'n the herd. If some'of the guys lose it and start gettin' violent, I'm more'n enough to handle it m'self. We aren't on equal footings here, y'understand?]

[Subaru:what's, your condition]

Hearing Subaru wrench out these words while gritting his teeth, Garfiel tossed back [Should'a said that in the first place] and clacked his canine fangs. Then, looking over Subaru from head to toe,

[Garfiel: My.....no, the Sanctuary's conditions're simple. You'll be the one to take the Trials. Do that, n'the rest is easy]

[Subaru: ——! Wait, that can't be right. If I do that then the whole point of.....]

It's true that this option had went through Subaru's mind many times before.

But, it was only the last resort, the one he must try to avoid if he could. More importantly, if he did so, then all of Emilia's efforts up to now would be——

[Garfiel: You might be misunderstandin' something, so let me tell y'now.....me or Granny or th'others, long as we get released from the Sanctuary, we don't really care who does it]

[Subaru: ————]

[Garfiel: If you want Princess-sama to do it and get some compliments from the hostages or Granny or others, that's just your thing. It's none'of my business what happened in your pasts or why you're wantin' to get over'em. All'n all, it's just your own problems, ain't it?]

There was no way to argue with that.

Garfiel was absolutely right, and Subaru, having completely overlooked their side of the story, had no right to insist on such things. Just as he said, whether it was wanting Emilia to take the Trials, or wanting her to be the one to overcome it, they were all just Subaru's

own problems.

And even more than that, he,

[Garfiel: ——Besides, 's it really so important t'overcome the Past?]

[Subaru: Eh?]

[Garfiel: It's been three days. Three. We had t'watch Princess-sama goin' into the Trials every day n'pull her out cryin'. Honestly, I can't stand watchin' anymore]

[Subaru: Can't stand... watching.....]

[Garfiel: Her gettin' pumped up for nothin' only t'get all hurt? Gettin' ahead of herself like "I have to do it no matter what", and comin' back wimperin' and apologizin' sorry she couldn't do it. So why in the hell're y'still makin' Princess-sama take th'Trials?]

Garfiel's words accurately summed up what happened to Emilia over past three days. The next night after the beginning of the Trials, Emilia challenged the first Trial for the second time, and again she failed to overcome her Past. But more importantly, Subaru, who had gone in with her, was not sent into a Trial at all.

At first, Subaru couldn't understand why the Tomb had left him out, but Emilia answered him when she returned halfway through the Trial—— someone in the Trial had told her the reason why Subaru couldn't begin the next Trial. It was very simple:

The second Trial takes place in the room beyond the first Trial.

Inside the Tomb, in the back of the room where the first Trial took place, there was a sealed rectangular door. Subaru originally thought it would only open after all three Trials had been passed—— but in fact, it was the second Trial waiting on the other side. Only someone who had passed the first Trial would be qualified to proceed.

In other words, if Subaru wasn't alone, he would not be able to challenge the second Trial. And the reason he didn't go alone even after he knew this was——

[Subaru: Emilia, will definitely overcome the Trials. So we.....]

[Garfiel: That expectation's just a bit too heavy, isn't it. You don't see Princess-sama sufferin' enough as it is? Makin' her force herself to face those memories, hurtin' and makin' her end up lookin' like that, is that what you people wanted? Is that what Princess-sama wants? My head's too dumb to understand it]

[Subaru: What Emilia.....wants.....]

Garfiel said those words while scratching at his head—— but to Subaru, it was like the jolt of being woken up from having ice water poured over his face.

Up until now, Subaru had respected Emilia's resolve to take on the Trials, and had devoted all his efforts to support her. Even knowing that it will be an arduous path, as long as she doesn't give up, he would continue to lend her his hand.

And, even as she continued to stand back up time and time again, it never once occurred to him to find out what she really wanted.

Come to think of it, Subaru didn't even know why Emilia wanted to be King.

The declaration she made in the Royal Selection Hall, about her intention to bring equality to all, could not possibly have been her reason to want to become the King.

From the unfair treatment and prejudice she continued to receive, one could imagine what must have accompanied Emilia all throughout her life. What were her thoughts as she lived through that, what were her feelings, her beliefs—— that made her decide to aim for the Throne?

Even in spite of his unrelenting desire to be at her side and to become her support, Subaru had neglected to ask the questions he should have asked at the start.

How did Emilia and Roswaal meet in the first place? Why would Roswaal help a Half-Elf become King? Her qualification to be King——to be the High Priestess of the Dragon was proven by the Gem on the Insignia, but how did Roswaal get the chance to let the Insignia touch her hand? What kind of common interests did Emilia and Roswaal have that made them form this cooperative relationship—— Subaru didn't know a single one those answers.

He had managed to come this far, without knowing a thing.

[Garfiel: Oy, don't know what kind'a shock y're busy experiencin', but if y'got nothin' else t'say I'm gonna go. I'm still in th'middle of huntin'..... n'bout that proposal, if y'agree t'my condition, go ahead and tell Granny about it. I won't be botherin' with the rest of it]

After giving Subaru who remained in suspended animation a shrug, Garfiel's figure disappeared into the dawn-lit forest.

Before he noticed it, the morning sun had already chased away the shroud of night, and the dense tangle of the shade-befallen forest had given way to the quiet peace of morning—— with dewdrops resting upon sprouting leaves, it was that kind of hour.

Left behind, Subaru looked up at the sky.

Above, between the gaps of trees and through the towering clouds, he caught a glimpse of the emerging Sun—— which, soon hiding behind the clouds once more, vanished along with the momentary radiance it brought upon the world.

Squinting his eyes at that momentary light, Subaru started to walk.

[Subaru: All I saw was myself facing my past, finding closure, and feeling glad that I did. But, for Emilia.....]

Subaru had been convinced that it was something anyone could resolve and walk away from.

Because he had been healed by the warmth of those memories he received, he was convinced that saying farewell to the past was the only way forward.

Being so smothered by the kindness of those around him, Subaru got the impression that the Past was something that ought to be looked back on.

Yet, Subaru's thoughts——

[Emilia: ——su... baru?]

For that silver haired girl hugging her knees in the corner of the room, how heavily they must have been weighing down on her.

Inside the house assigned to her, sitting on the ice-cold floor beside her bed, Emilia was quietly, quietly, waiting for time to pass.

She was usually no good in the mornings, but it didn't come as surprise to find her awake so early. Her eyes as they turned to him were bloodshot, and across her beautiful, majestic face were dark streaks left behind by tears—— The fact that she hadn't slept for a second was as clear as day.

Noticing Subaru's arrival, she turned her face away so he would not see that she had been crying.

[Emilia: Ah, s.....sorry. I-is it time? It's time already? It's, sooner than I thought..... but, I must. I must do my best..... it's, time for the Trials, isn't it?]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan]

[Emilia: I-it's alright. Today for sure, this time, for sure, I.....enn, I will definitely pass. I, I'm already figuring out more or less what is going to, happen in the Trial. See, it's the same pa...tterns. Subaru said, enn, that, yeah, see, I know..... enn, so, I, I'm alright.....]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, it's fine. It's not nighttime yet, last night hasn't even ended. It's morning now. It's still, a long time away]

[Emilia: I, I'll be able to tell if you try to dupe me. Because, look.....it's, dark outside. Mornings, should be brighter.....ah, but, my, conversation with the micro-spirits today.....]

Looking up at Subaru, mumbling this under her breath, Emilia's eyes were shuddering. Inside them, were the shock and anger at herself for having failed to abide by her contract, and she looked as if she was about to sever their bond just to punish herself or her own neglect.

[Subaru: Emilia!]

[Emilia: ah.....]

Grabbing her hand mid-air, Subaru entwined his fingers with hers.

Seeing their hands tied together, Emilia was stunned into silence, and, gradually, she saw her own reflection inside Subaru's black eyes.

[Emilia: I, I.....]

[Subaru: I'm the only one here right now. So no matter how weak you want to be, it's alright. There's no need to rush, or push yourself too hard. I will always stay by your side. No matter what]

[Emilia: su..baru.....]

Clinging onto his outstretched hand, Emilia quietly whispered his name as she let her head drop to the side. Just like this, letting her hold onto his arm, Subaru sat down beside her.

With his free hand, he slowly patted her silver hair as her body slowly lost its strength, until, after a little while, he could hear her soundly asleep.

She must have been exhausted. But even so, she couldn't pass the night alone, and had to lean on Subaru in the end.

Taking a glance at the sleeping Emilia, quietly breathing beside him, Subaru lightly traced his finger over her adorable cheeks, and confirmed the traces of her tears.

——This was as far as she will go, he decided.

Chapter 23 [A Step Forward]

[Subaru: Alright, I'll just be gone for a bit. We should be back by tomorrow and..... I know I said this a few times already, but, there's no need to push yourself by taking the Trials anymore. Just rest a little]

[Emilia: I know~ I get it already. Gees Subaru, you don't have to look so worried. I'll be good and take the day off, just like you told me to]

Emilia pouted her lips as she said this, looking up at Subaru aboard the carriage. Subaru wryly smiled in front of her adorable antics, and made an effort to hide the pain inside his heart.

The time was a little before noon on the same day as his conversation with Garfiel, and several hours had passed since he visited Emilia in her room.

[Otto: Natsuki-san, we're all set here. You can just say the word]

[Subaru: Oooh, that was quick. The speed at which you must be able to skip town after committing some heinous deed is truly impressive. From now on, shall I call you "Otto the Night-Skipper"?]

[Otto: I've no idea what the term "Night-Skipper" means, but I'm almost definitely certain it's something disreputable and so I'm afraid I'll have to firmly decline]

Otto curled his lip into a scowl and started shooting Subaru a stink look, to which Subaru only shot an unreservedly-wry smile in return. Looking past Otto, one could see the dragon carriages of Subaru's party lined up along the road.

Numbering six in total—— they would accommodate 42 people in all. Which would be the total number of refugees and hired merchants from Arlam village, if you didn't count the one extra traveling merchant who happened to be tagging along. This meant that,

[Subaru: Really, it's almost disappointing how easily they went along with the idea.....
Honestly, I was preparing for a little more resistance]

[Ram: That's because Barusu cleverly went behind everyone's back to negotiate with Garf beforehand, isn't it? You figured Lewes-sama can be reasoned with, so as long as Garf didn't interrupt your negotiations, there won't be any problems]

While Subaru was busy scratching his neck, Ram, dressed in her usual maid's uniform, threw these words at him from the base of the carriage. From beneath her peach colored hair, she was looking up at him with her usual expression of disdain.

[Ram: Ram would have liked to lodge a complaint about how you didn't obtain freedom for Roswaal-sama as well, but...]

[Subaru: Being the HOSTAGE OF ALL HOSTAGES, he's a bit more suited to stay behind, I think. Even if you wanted me negotiate for him, I wouldn't know what to say to them. All things considered, it was already a pretty big accomplishment getting them to let the villagers go, so please understand!]

[Ram: ...you did well, for a Barusu, that's all I have to say. Now show some gratitude to Ram]

[Subaru: Why do I get the feeling that if I thanked you here I'd be losing out somehow?]

Just as all of Heaven and Earth shuddered at Ram's acknowledgement of Subaru's success, Subaru turned his eyes back on Emilia, who was fidgeting beside her.

There was anxiety and gloom within her violet eyes, but when she noticed Subaru's gaze turning towards her, she quickly chased those sentiments away.

[Emilia: Thank you.... You know, if you hadn't gone ahead and said anything, I, don't think I would've even noticed what was going on]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan already has an important enough role as Emilia-tan. All the things that are going on around you, you can just leave that stuff to us. You've only got one big task to focus on. And we'll handle everything else, so don't worry]

Watching Subaru forcefully slap a hand onto his chest, Emilia covered her mouth, but couldn't stop a giggle from leaking out. Then, wiping away the tears that had welled up in her eyes, she nodded with an [Enn], and,

[Emilia: I understand. Then I'll leave it to you, Subaru. And.....]

[Subaru: I know, I know. Don't worry, as soon as I get everyone to the village, I'll come back to you right away. Of course, I could also take the opportunity to bring back any precious stuffed animals that you may have forgotten at the Mansion?]

[Emilia: I outgrew that stuff a long time ago. Also, I'm not asking you to come back quickly. But of course, I would be happier if you did come back quickly.....]

[Subaru: Then, what're you trying to say?]

[Emilia:come back safe. Of course, the sooner you come back the better, but, I'd be even happier if you came back safe]

[Subaru: AAGH, my heart!]

Wriggling around for a second, overwhelmed by the pain of LOVE in his chest, Subaru covered his love-sick heart with both hands and stumbled backwards. Emilia tilted her head in confusion, but Subaru, still busy hyperventilating, extended his palm towards her.

[Subaru: OK OK, I got it already. Quickly, and safely, I promise I will come back to your side. Unless you want me to pinky-promise too?]

[Emilia: That thing you did with Petra about what happens if you lie?Sure, ok. Let's do it]

[Subaru: Ouuuggghh, so straightforward]

Emilia took a step forward, and Subaru bent his knees to meet her. Just like this, Subaru, from up on the carriage, and Emilia, standing below, tangled their pinkies together. And then, chanting out the traditional spell, they sealed their promise as their fingers parted. For a moment, Emilia continued to stare at her finger that had separated from Subaru's, and then, she took him into her violet eyes,

[Emilia: Subaru. To a spirit-arts user, promises are.....]

[Subaru: Super important, right? I've learned my lesson, and I've become painfully aware of that. So I'll never break another promise with Emilia-tan again. Also, I'll try to keep my promises with other people too, if possible. I hope you can accept that]

[Emilia: Hmm, I suppose I'll have to]

A smile emerged on Emilia's face. And, after making sure of this, Subaru straightened up his legs, did a big stretch, turned around, looked up, and raising both his hands up into the air,

[Subaru: Al-right, let's get this show on the road! Destination: Arlam village! Total travelers: 44! This is a great migration we're doing here, I'll be counting on all of you from here on!]

A series of cheers went up in response to Subaru's shouting, and, just like this, the great migration got underway.

——After the hard-won victory at the negotiations, the released hostages embarked upon the road leading back home.

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After he concluded his conversation with Garfiel, while watching over the stricken Emilia in her sleep, Subaru came to the decision—— that he would accept Garfiel's condition, and negotiate to release the hostages from the Sanctuary.

Once he had put Emilia to bed, Subaru waited for everyone to wake before gathering all the key players into Lewes's house, where he planned to put forth his proposal. Given the battle of words he had with Garfiel, he had expected a fair amount of resistance. —But, in reality, Lewes did nothing but agree with him the whole time. Rather than oppose him, she had even offered several additional concessions. The result was that everything had gone exactly as he envisioned, but still, he couldn't quite shake the feeling that it was different from what he expected.

Later, when Emilia woke up, he explained to her everything that had happened, and then gave the same explanation to the refugees inside the Cathedral. The villagers were surprised and skeptical at first, but when they understood that they would be allowed to return home safely, Subaru was happy to see them overjoyed.

Although Subaru was the reason they ended up in this situation in the first place, once he announced they would be allowed to leave, all the villagers showered their gratitude upon him, which was rather embarrassing. And after all of that, it was finally time to put the plan into action.

[Otto: But I have to say, this was pretty unexpected]

The one who said this was Otto, who was holding the reins beside Subaru.

Just like on the way to the Sanctuary, their dragon carriage was drawn by the ground dragons, Patrasche and Furufu, only, this time, Subaru was sitting next to Otto on the driver's bench.

[Subaru: Nnnuh?]

[Otto: You were asleep just now, weren't you?]

[Subaru: I was just deep in thought, and don't say that like I was hiding something or anything. Anyway, I was only half unconscious so I didn't hear what you said. So what were you saying?]

[Otto: If you're going to cover things up, at least have the courtesy to see it through to the end..... At any rate, I was trying to say this current development was pretty unexpected]

As usual, the back and forth between Subaru and Otto was all over the place. Perhaps because Otto had already gotten used to Subaru's antics, he didn't react as dramatically as before, but merely gave a perfunctory nudge at their surroundings to indicate what he was talking about.

[Otto: I didn't think they'd let them go this easily. We merchants have a saying, "You should keep hold of all the weaknesses you can in case you have use for them later"]

[Subaru: Is that really a merchant's expression? You sure that didn't come from some corrupt Edo-period magistrate? My impression of your profession just became way way way way shadier. What do you have to say for yourself?]

Thinking back, Subaru had very few memories of Otto ever acting like a merchant. There was only the one time when he made the unsubstantiated claim that he had bought too much oil, when in fact, it was entirely possible he was just a pyromaniac. Even now, the background of this so-called merchant was quite suspect.

[Otto: What's with those eyes looking at me like I'm someone suspicious?]

[Subaru: That's because I *am* looking at someone totally suspicious here. Are you really a merchant? I don't think I've ever seen you do anything merchant-y in front of me]

[Otto: Weren't you the one who forced me, against my will, to file those documents and ledgers loaded to the brim with confidential information!? Are you suffering from amnesia!?!]

[Subaru: No, that could simply be your clever attempt to convince someone who thought you were a spy that you really are a merchant. Thinking about it that way, you're far more likely to be an enemy agent.....]

[Otto: With that kind of ridiculous logic, it'd be easier for me to become a God than try to convince you of my innocence, Natsuki-san]

[Subaru: Hey, Patrasche, did you hear that? This guy sitting next to me just said he thinks he can become a God..... I'm a bit worried about my safety]

[Otto: Huh? Dammit! Why did you have to..... aaah! Now even Patrasche-chan is looking at me with a look of pity! Please stop it already!]

Responding to Subaru's voice, Patrasche made a short cry. Hearing this, Otto fell into despair and hugged his head with his hands. That seemed to have been Patrasche offering her own input about Otto. In times like these, one might prefer not to have the Divine Protection of "Anima-Whispering". It was then, that,

[Garfiel: Y'fools don't change no matter where y'go do'ya?]

Garfiel, who was running alongside their dragon carriage, interjected himself into the conversation.

The dragon carriages were traveling down an animal path through the middle of the forest, so they weren't at top speeds. Even if Subaru had been sprinting with all his strength, he wouldn't have managed to keep up with their current pace, but Garfiel was easily able to catch up, and accompany the winding carriages of refugees.

Not even short of breath, Garfiel was kicking off the ground and leaping great distances with each stride.

[Garfiel: Y'know, y'got the charm o' someone straight outta "The Tale of th'End of Bakimu the Horse Wrangler"]

[Subaru: Aren't idioms supposed to be short and clear ways to express your meaning to whoever you're talking to?It doesn't even feel like we're having the same conversation here]

[Garfiel: Huh? What ya try'n to say, y'bastard?]

Garfiel crimped up his nose in annoyance, and Subaru simply shrugged at that carnivorous expression, saying [Come to think of it],

[Subaru: You volunteered to guide us out, but I don't see you doing much guiding. Aren't you kinda shirking on your duties?]

[Garfie: Didn't want it t'be like this. But y'fella's ground dragons're pretty smart, aren' they? They only walked this road once but they're remeberin' it perfectly]

[Subaru: Well, that's only to be expected of my girl Patrasche. This is just beginner stuff for her. Stuff like leaping through a hoop of fire, balancing on a ball, or even riding a unicyc-..... hey wait, Patrasche-san, why're you swerving around!?!]

In response to Subaru's outrageous claims about her acrobatic abilities, Patrasche began expressing her displeasure by running in zig-zags. Subaru, gluing himself to his seat, started making a scene aboard the carriage. Observing this display, Garfiel snorted [What in th'hell are you doin'?], and then, looking toward Otto who was trying to hang onto the reins,

[Garfiel: Lil'bro here said somethin' interestin' just now. Somethin' 'bout bein' "Profitable t'be grabin' yer opponents where he's weak"?]

[Otto: Yeah, I do think it's true. Not that I personally believe it's a good way of thinking, but.....for instance, the more hostages you have at your disposal, the more options you give yourself for how to use them, right? Like, if you want to create a sense of danger, the more hostages you have, the more options you'll have to.....]

[Subaru: Oyoyoy! There's some serious doubt whether this "little bro" is legitimately a merchant here. He's definitely the kind of guy who's committed some horrible atrocities and was forced to flee a country somewhere!]

[Otto: Why are you so convinced I'm some kind of criminal!?!]

“I wonder why Otto always manages to fall right into those”, Subaru tilted his head, thinking. Then, to get the conversation back on track, [Anyhow], he started again,

[Subaru: For the time being, basically, it’s because I already talked it over with Garfiel beforehand, and decided to accept his condition……. that’s why the rest of it went so smoothly]

[Otto: Accept……. your condition?]

Since Subaru didn’t seem to want to talk about it, Otto raised the question to Garfiel instead. Garfiel grinned with his canine fangs, before opening his mouth to speak,

[Garfiel: Simple, ain’t it? Instead of the crybaby Princess-sama, our boy Subaru’ll be finishin’ the rest’of the Trials and liberate the Sanctuary right’n quick]

[Otto: That’s…….]

Otto widened his eyes at Gafiel’s words, before shooting a sidelong glance at Subaru. Then, after opening and closing his mouth a few times, mumbling incoherently,

[Otto: Are you sure that’s alright, Natsuki-san?]

[Subaru: What do you mean “alright”?]

[Otto: You’re already taking the Trials, so that’s not the issue……. but I suppose what I mean to ask is if it’s alright to just take away Emilia-sama’s part in the whole thing]

That was Subaru’s dilemma as well. Although Otto had struggled to get the words out, he had cut to the heart of the matter. Subaru frowned, but Otto continued to push the issue,

[Otto: Of course, I have no idea what the Trials would entail, and I understand Emilia-sama’s isn’t doing very well. But, if Emilia is to win the Royal Selection, she needs the support from the people of the Sanctuary and the Roswaal domain, right? This is her chance to get both at once, and I don’t know if throwing that away so soon is…….]

[Subaru: It's time..... we don't know how long it will take. If, in the meantime, her base collapses from underneath her, that would be the perfect definition of putting the cart before the horse. More important than that is Emilia herself.....]

[Otto: You think she's at her limit, then? I would disagree. I've only known her a short time, but I think Emilia-sama's made of some tough stuff. Sure, right after she came out of the first trial, she was pretty out of sorts, but other than that she's been able to keep herself together pretty well, don't you think?]

Upon hearing Otto's perspective, Subaru bit down hard on his lip.

It's true that from Otto's point of view, it must look like that Subaru was selling her short. —But, what Otto didn't see, was that she had been putting all her effort into just keeping up appearances whenever there was anyone besides Subaru around her.

Just like when she was sending him off at the start of their present journey. Whenever a third party was involved, she seemed to be able to maintain the same calm demeanor as always.

On the other hand, when it was just her and Subaru alone, the facade would fall away, and she would return to the miserable state Subaru had found her in that morning.

She depended on Subaru—— and her true state was not something anyone else could see.

Seeing Subaru holding his tongue, Otto wanted to continue speaking. But it was someone else who interrupted him,

[Garfiel: That's 'nuff. We're 'bout to pass through the Barrier o' the Sanctuary. I can't go no further than that]

[Subaru:Just out of curiosity, but, what would happen if you tried to force yourself through the Barrier?]

[Garfiel: Haven't tried it so I wouldn't know, but I imagin' it'd be similar to when your Princess-sama lost consciousness. But it doesn't matter either way]

Glad that the topic changed, Subaru jumped right on it, while Garfiel turned his head, and leaped into the air. Without a sound, he nimbly landed on the luggage compartment of Subaru's dragon carriage, and pointed a finger at the two on the driver's bench who were looking back over their shoulders.

[Garfiel: Accordin' to the condition, after you drop 'em off, you just turn right around and get your asses back here..... Ah, well, that lil'bro next to ya don't matter though]

[Otto: Stop joking around, of course I'm coming back. After all, I still haven't even gotten an audience with Margrave Mathers yet!]

[Subaru: Oh? Really? You still haven't introduced yourself?]

[Otto: That's right! I've been asking for a week, but no matter what time I come Ram-san tells me "Your timing is inconvenient" or "He's resting"..... and keeps chasing me away!]

Angrily breathing out his nostrils with his shoulders huffing up and down, maybe Otto truly had divinely bad luck when it came to timing, but——

[Subaru: Well, that was probably on purpose. Ever since the Trials started, they've been giving me some half-assed excuses to not let me see him too]

Subaru mumbled his own guess under his breath.

After they had begun the Trials, Subaru had barely seen Roswaal at all. Always standing in between them, Ram had been rebuffing Subaru exactly as she had rebuffed Otto. On the surface, it was all for Roswaal's recuperation, but that was obviously just a pretense. In fact, it seemed that ever since Subaru first told him that he had taken the Trial, Roswaal stopped taking any visitors.

Subaru couldn't forget the change in Roswaal's expression when he heard that Subaru had passed and Emilia had failed. At least, it was the first time he had ever seen such an expression from him before.

For just a brief moment, that care-free look on that painted clown-face fell away, and beneath it —— was an emotion that was neither fury nor sorrow, but something more complicated altogether.

[Garfiel: Don't put t'much thought into it, yeah? Anyway, when yer comin' back just use the same road. This time I'll pay 'ttention so I don't attack ya, but don't forget the password]

[Subaru: Password?]

[Garfiel: Long as ya say the words when crossin' th' barrier, nobody will be assailin' ya, got it? The password is "Baira Baira below th'Grimoire"]

[Subaru: Huh, what? "Baibai to the grime"?]

That was the worst password ever, using a completely incomprehensible idiom.

Subaru scowled. It was immediately obvious who came up with this password.

Garfiel just stood there looking smug as it was all natural, while Otto was bewilderedly writing down the passphrase on a memo. Leaving the task of remembering important things to Otto, Subaru gave a long sigh, and,

[Subaru: Anyway, long as we say it we can come back in, no questions asked, right?]

[Garfiel: I ain't the only one who's on patrol, y'know. There're others more hot blooded than I am. From their point o' view, that migh' be the perfect time to take ya out and stop ya from completin' the Trials]

[Subaru:I do remember you saying something like that]

Lewes was at the head of the faction that wanted to be liberated from the Sanctuary. But there was also the other opposing faction that wanted to stay.

Garfiel's warning, then, was telling them not to let their guard down and give the other faction a chance to take advantage of their carelessness.

[Subaru: Ok, gotcha. Thanks for all the ways you've been looking out for us..... I guess there's no reason to say goodbyes, since we'll be seeing each other again in half a day or so. But, thanks anyway]

[Garfiel: Jus' followin' orders from the old hag, I don't care one way or the other. More import'ntly, well uh...]

When Subaru thanked him, Garfiel waved his hand to dismiss him, but his words trailed off toward the end. Seeing something quite uncharacteristic from him, which Subaru furrowed his brows. And then, Garfiel finally continued [Uuuh],

[Garfiel: When y'get back to the mansion, is that Frederica girl gonna be there?]

[Subaru: Yeah, she should be. Speaking of which, its sounds like you know her somehow. What's up with that?]

[Garfiel: We've got a complicated relationship, that's all. Nothing I really wanna talk about, it's just.....]

[Subaru: I'll tell her that you're totally thinking about her. Maybe she'll even have a message for you too]

[Garfiel:I ain't askin' you t'...]

Suddenly averting his eyes, as if to get away from Subaru's smirk, Garfiel jumped right off the carriage. And, as he landed on the ground, the train of dragon carriages passed through the Barrier between the Sanctuary and the Forest. Putting both of his hands on his waist, Garfiel sent them off, shouting,

[Garfiel: Don't even think'of runnin' away, Subaru! Y'better keep your promise even if it kills ya! That was my one condition for lettin' you outta here!]

[Subaru: Yeah, no worries on that count. My promise-keeping POWERS' been super buffed lately!]

Letting these words of farewell resound throughout the forest, with a smile, Subaru raised up a fist at the distant figure. And Garfiel matched it by pumping up his own fist in response.

Watching as the caravan vanished into the shadows of the forest, Garfiel continued standing there with his fist raised up in the air.

——After passing through the Barrier and coming out of the forest, they didn't encounter any problems on the rest of the road.

If nothing got in the way, it should be about eight hours journey from the Sanctuary to the Mansion. They stopped twice to rest, but since the villagers were eager to return to their homes, they kept their breaks short and forced themselves to continue.

So, all in all, it was only eight hours later when the refugees returned to Arlam Village. Having departed early in the afternoon, when they arrived, it was already several hours after the shroud of night covered over the world.

[Subaru: My butt hurts from all that sitting.....but that wasn't too bad]

Getting off from the dragon carriage, and giving his waist a twist, Subaru breathed a sigh of relief.

All around the village in the night, voices of rejoicing and reunion sprung up, and there were even a few shedding tears of joy in their midst. Considering the calamities that had assailed this village, Subaru decided that it was not an overreaction after all, and that no one could really ridicule them for that.

For the first time in several days, with the return of the rest of the villagers, Arlam village came to life in spite of the night. The villagers who had mostly wallowed in gloom inside the Sanctuary now all showed the same smiles on their faces.

And the other half who had waited for them in the village, were finally relieved to see their family safely returned to them.

[Otto: Natsuki-san, are we heading back right away?]

While Subaru watched over the bustling crowd from a distance, Otto scampered over after looking around for him.

Allowing Otto to catch his breath, Subaru shook his head with a [Nah],

[Subaru: There's no rush, we can take a little break before heading back. Besides, I should stop by the Mansion to explain everything to Frederica and Petra]

[Otto: Aah, that's right. I mean, I also have some things I need to discuss with my fellow merchants]

[Subaru: Discuss what with your fellow merchants?]

Otto pointed to the owners of the six dragon carriages standing at the side.

They had been hired to evacuate the villagers, but wound up with the misfortune of getting imprisoned in the Sanctuary along with them. Now that they were freed, they were, above all, relieved, but their gazes toward Subaru were,

[Subaru: I must be imagining this, but, isn't this supposed to be a Parallel World? Why do I get the feeling their eyes all have Dollar signs in them?]

[Otto: Back when we were hired, the condition was the purchase of our goods as well as additional compensation to be negotiated later. So I'd like to come to a consensus on how much compensation we'll actually demand. I won't be proposing anything outrageous, of course, but seeing that they've been burdened with the hostage situation.....it might get a little pricey, so be prepared]

[Subaru: Well, it's not like it'll be my wallet getting plundered. As long as you use appropriate discretion, it wouldn't be too bad to see Ros-chi's face go pale every once in a while?]

[Otto: That's my Natsuki-san! You understand!]

Clapping his hands, Otto happily strutted over to his fellow merchants.

Hearing the good news brought by Otto's triumphant return, the merchants' cheers resounded through the village in the night. Somehow, Subaru got the feeling their celebrations sounded even happier than the villagers having their reunions, but he decided to consciously put it out of his mind, and straightened himself up.

In any case, there shouldn't be any problems in the village for now. Otto will take care of the merchants' demands, and Roswaal will end up dealing with it. Somewhat looking forward to see what expression will come on Roswaal's face when he gets hit with the bill, Subaru headed towards the Mansion.

After walking fifteen minutes from Arlam village—— at the end of his path stood the lonely Roswaal Mansion.

In the dark of night, only the Mansion's lights asserted their existence within its shadowy contours, lending the place an eerie aura from the distance, in the hours after sunset.

Subaru remarked on this as he stood before the front gates, absentmindedly staring at the Mansion. Naturally, the majority of the Mansion's lights were out, and there were only light flowing out of the entry hall and the servant's rooms. As well as a room on the highest floor—— which, surely, must be Roswaal's office.

[Subaru: Otto sorted all the paperworks, but over the week it must have piled up again]

Frederica, being the all-powerful-maid that she is, wouldn't have lost to Otto when it came to managing paperworks, but that wasn't the only task she had to take care of. Even with Petra's assistance, maintaining the entire Mansion required a considerable amount of effort.

From the fact that she was still working away in the office in the middle of the night, one could imagine the immensity of her duties.

[Subaru: One way or another, I'll pull that Otto even deeper into this and work him like a mule as the Emilia-faction-paperwork-machine. I'll make him the official office robot]

While thinking of plots to trap that young man in the village with loose cheeks and dreams of big money, Subaru pushed open the gates and entered the Mansion grounds.

Heading to the entryway, he struck the door with the falcon-shaped knocker,

[Subaru: Apologies for the late night visit. I'm here from the Fire Departme~nt]

Sending sharp knocks ringing throughout the night, Subaru shouted out an appropriate call as usual.

Speaking of which, how do the people in this world handle fires and disasters, anyway?

Subaru tilted his head, wondering about this pointless question. But,

[Subaru: There's no reply]

And here he thought Frederica would swoop in to respond, swift like the wind, but seeing that was not the case, Subaru dropped down his shoulders.

After a little while longer, Subaru decided that no one was coming and abandoned waiting.

Then, grandly pushing open the door,

[Subaru: Oooo~oy, I'm ho~~me. Food! Bath! Bed!]

And, shouting these three orders like he owned the place, Subaru struck out a pose. But there was still no reply.

Tasting the nostalgic sensation of sliding along the floor in awkward silence all by himself, Subaru headed up the stairs——to the servant quarters to look for Petra.

[Subaru: Frederica's probably in the office. I'll go find Petra first.....then, I'll have to look for Beako too]

One by one, the three people who remained behind in the Mansion surfaced in Subaru's mind.

Regardless of the precocious Petra or the politely insolent Frederica, the reunion Subaru had to prepare for was the one with that Drill-Haired Loli.

Last time, the way they parted was indeed a way to part.

Without giving him a single answer to his vital questions, she had chased him out, sobbing, with an expression full of sadness.

[Subaru: I'll have to apologize..... but it'll be kind of weird. I feel like I didn't really do anything wrong.....]

Even so, Subaru got the feeling that something would be different if he met her again and talked.

Besides, he'd like to think that he must have advanced a little by saying farewell to his past. With his current state of mind, perhaps he would be able to face her a little differently than last time.

And so,

[Subaru: The first time was only a skirmish.....well that's one way of thinking about it]

Subaru gave the door a knock, and immediately swung it open as if to surprise the person inside, but he dropped his shoulders once again.

Walking in on a delightfully-embarrassing-clothe-changing-time——was not something he was hoping for considering the target was a little girl, but no such thing happened, since there was no one in the room.

It was a room decorated to Petra's tastes, adorned with cute little items, and kept tidy and organized—— but its owner was nowhere to be found.

Inside the room lighted by the crystal lamps, Subaru tilted his head,

[Subaru: Going out without turning off the lights doesn't seem like something a dependable girl like Petra would do.....if she isn't here, maybe she's in the office studying?]

It was possible, if the spartan Frederica was involved.

In addition to the chores, she might be teaching Petra office work as well to turn her into another all-powerful maid. It would be a great help, but since Petra was already overtaking

Subaru in the domestic duties, if she overtook him in office work as well, Subaru will have no hole to crawl into.

[Subaru: Nonono, she can't even do all her arithmetics yet, I still have the advantage! Don't you underestimate the modern Japanese compulsory education!]

Muttering this while flying up the stairs, heading to the highest floor——he arrived at a double door in the dead center of the hallway, and, clearing his throat again, he knocked. The heavy sound echoed outward, and surely it was sent into the room. But there was no reply.

[Subaru: ————]

It was all too strange. Subaru's accumulated wariness so far was now raised to a whole different level. Trying to cover up that feeling with some lighthearted humor, Subaru swept his gaze down the hallway from end to end, and then, at the office door itself. He leaned his ear against the door to listen to what was inside, but no sound came through the thick, heavy door. There was nothing else he could gather if he continued to stay outside.

——Petra's room showed no sign of being disturbed. It was neatly arranged, and her bed had been made as if she was just getting ready to sleep.

It was the same for the Mansion, at least on the surface, and there seemed to be nothing out of place. Cleaned and organized with a thoroughness that could only belong to Frederica, there was not a speck of dust left on the window sills.

So Subaru's wariness was only elevated because he hadn't seen either of the girls.

[Subaru: ————hu]

He lightly pushed on the doors, and they opened without a sound.

The next moment, light flooded out from the room into the hallway, and relying on that light, Subaru scanned the room's interiors. There was an ebony desk, and a leather chair. From the direction of the bookshelves on the wall, a wind came blowing through—— The

windows were closed. But he could feel a cold wind was blowing. Intuitively, he knew that something was strange.

Sliding over the floor as he sneaked into the room, Subaru followed the direction of the wind——and saw it.

The bookshelf in the back of the room had been shifted sideways, revealing a usually-hidden door installed into the wall. Beyond it, was a spiral staircase that extended downwards, far, far beyond sight——

[Subaru: Right. There was a hidden passage here. I remember, I remember]

It was in the previous loop.

Despairing after the villagers of Arlam had been slaughtered at the Witch Cult's hands, and after finding Rem and Ram's corpses in the Estate, when his mind was an inch away from shattering, Subaru arrived here.

Then, passing through this hidden passage into the undergrounds, there——

[Subaru: I was frozen by Puck, I think]

There was no way to be sure. But he clearly remembered the frozen bodies of the Witch Cultists who must have pursued Emilia into the same passage, as well as his own similar end, and the Return by Death that followed.

After that, without placing much importance on this detail, he had forgotten to even verify the existence of this underground passage,

[Subaru: But why is it now.....]

If it was being used, at least it meant there was a need to evacuate.

As for who might have used it, it could only someone within the Mansion who knew of this passage's existence——probably Frederica. If she and Petra escaped through this passage, that would be the simplest explanation. But the question is,

[Subaru: What, were they running from?]

As intelligent as Frederica is, she must have had considerable reasons to make this decision.

Since there was no sign of an attack inside the Mansion, she must have detected the imminent danger beforehand. Thinking to this point, the words “Witch Cult” flashed across Subaru’s mind, but he immediately shook his head and drove off that thought, [Subaru: If that were the case, it’d be too unnatural for Frederica to not leave a single note. Besides, the villagers in Arlam didn’t notice anything either.....if it was something as dangerous as the Witch Cult, she would have done something to prevent the villagers from getting caught up in it]

At least, Frederica’s support for the Roswaal-backed Emilia was not in question. If so, then she would have done her best to take the optimum measures to handle this situation. If the villagers didn’t know about this, then it couldn’t have been the Witch Cult.

In any case,

[Subaru: Frederica and Petra probably already left the Mansion.....then, I’ll]

For a moment, Subaru was about to enter the passage to meet up with Frederica and Petra, but what stopped in his tracks was the girl whose name hadn’t occurred to him of up to now.

If Frederica had judged beforehand that they must leave the Mansion, surely, they would have taken Rem along as well.

On the other hand, there was also,

[Subaru: As far as I know, Beatrice isn’t the kind of kid who can read the mood]

There was also that impudent Drill-Haired Loli, who certainly would have refused Frederica’s proposal.

She would have shut herself off inside the Forbidden Library, and made a fuss insisting that she will be fine no matter what, and kicked aside all their worries and concerns, and, at last, without a doubt, she would have sat there alone with a lonely expression on her face. Because he knew this without a doubt,

[Subaru: I'll pull her out.....!]

If nobody else could bring her out, then Subaru will do it himself.

It doesn't matter how firmly she believes in the safety of her own fortress.

Knowing that danger was closing in on this place, there was no way he could leave a little girl behind.

[Subaru: And since I've made up my mind about that——!]

Turning his back to the hidden passage, Subaru took a sharp breath, and dashed out of the office.

The most sure-fire way to find Beatrice would have been to open every single door in the Mansion from end to end, but, for Subaru, somewhere along the way, he'd just somehow get the feeling that this door would be the one. And sure enough, he would see her on the other side.

So, starting from the doors on the uppermost floor——

[Subaru: T-tt?]

The foot he just swung out in his stride tangled onto something, and Subaru rolled onto the floor.

A rather embarrassing start, was the first thing that came to mind. Stumbling over right after acting cool was not quite what he was aiming for.

Pushing his hands onto the hallway carpet, Subaru turned around to see what he tripped on. And he saw, a little in front of the door to the office, something had dropped on the floor.

It was pink, and very long, and stretched on for several steps all the way to Subaru's feet. Following on from there, if you asked just where it would end, it wouldn't be very difficult to guess.

——It was something that had spilled out the side of Subaru's opened belly.

[Subaru: ——ha?]

The left side of his jacket had been cleanly sliced through, and his pink entrails were spilling out from the gap.

They trailed all the way from the door to Subaru's feet, tangling them up. In other words, somewhere along the way, his stomach had been cut open without him realizing it, or something along those lines.

[Subaru:oughbh]

The moment he took this in, chunks of clotting blood rose up choking in his throat, as his vision became painted with red.

He tried using his fingers to push the organs that spilled out due to his abdominal pressure back into the gap that was pushing it out, but, running out of strength, his knees collapsed from under him. Unable to hold up his body, he sprawled onto the floor.

He couldn't understand what had happened to him. Surely, he had just started running...

[???: ——Didn't I tell you? Didn't we promise?]

Suddenly, he heard a voice.

In front, above the fallen Subaru's head, someone was speaking.

He lacked the strength to raise his head. His consciousness was desperately trying to pull back the overflowing intestines, the gushing blood, and the world that was drawing away. His body heat was rapidly dropping. With every cough, the blood clots jamming in his throat splashed onto his face, and, with eyes that were starting to blur, Subaru desperately tried to hold onto this world.

"This is the end", his intuition told him.

Somewhere in his heart, he understood this, but "Subaru cannot end like this", he scolded back.

If he didn't learn anything, he cannot let it end. Just one thing, anything, don't let it end until you've learned *something*. Something, something something something something something.

The footsteps sent out ripples. A black shadow was standing in the center of the corridor stained red by chunks of his blood.

Black clothes. Slender. Black hair. Looking down on him lovingly, with those lustful eyes. Running these through his mind, and remembering the tactile sensation of “Belly Sliced Open”, Subaru understood.

It wasn’t the Witch Cult, but a genuine threat, nonetheless. It was——

[Elsa: That until the next time we meet, you should take good care of your bowels?]

A deviant declaration of love.

Subaru certainly caught it——as his consciousness began to fade.

Fading, fading, fading, darkening, darkening, until,

Everything vanished in the end——and started over again.

——The curtain has risen on the Fourth Death-Loop.

Chapter 24 [False Start]

The very first sensation that cut into Subaru's consciousness was one of discomfort.

[Subaru: Uech! Oueh! Upuegch!]

Feeling the strange foreign-body-sensation of chewing on gravel accompanied by a bitter earthy-taste dancing around on his tongue, Subaru immediately went into a coughing fit trying to spit the stuff out, when he opened his eyes.

He could see only darkness, and felt as if a cold touch was running across his entire body. Judging from the hard tactile sensation, and the direction in which gravity was pulling him, he determined that he was lying sideways on the ground. Then, slowly looking around with eyes that were just growing accustomed to the dark—— he realized that he was inside the old ruins he had seen many times before.

[Subaru: I'm, inside the Tomb?]

As if to make sure, he gave his mouth a swirl. The taste left over from spitting out gravel was still fresh in his memory.

Last time, too, he remembered waking up with pebbles in his mouth. In other words, the point in time must be,

[Subaru: Just after First Trial, then.....? So I came back here..... no, more importantly.....]

If this was really right after returning from the first Trial where he had made peace with his past, then Subaru wouldn't be the only one who had collapsed here,

[Subaru: ——Emilia!]

Right away, in the darkness, he found the silver-haired girl collapsed beside him.

Approaching her, and seeing the same agonized expression as last time, just as he was about to extend his finger to touch her sleeping cheeks, Subaru hesitated.

Having already accompanied and watched over Emilia several times as she took the Trials, Subaru knew. That if she was touched in her sleeping state, regardless of what was happening in the Trial, it would be interrupted and she would be returned here.

As such, it's even possible that she could be woken up right when she was about to pass the Trial. Therefore, he had to be very careful about touching her while inside the Tomb.

But,

[Subaru: I already know this attempt doesn't end well.....]

Shaking his head, Subaru crushed his hesitation, and burned her sleeping face into his eyes as he took her body gently into his arms. Her pained expression quickly receded, and she immediately began to wake——

[Emilia: su... baru.....?]

[Subaru: Yeah, that's right. It's me, Emilia-tan. Are you alright?]

Opening her eyes, Emilia called his name as if still half asleep. Subaru answered her with a reassuring smile, and waited for her to regain her bearings.

Just like this, he waited. For her to remember where she was, to take in the results of the Trial, and to begin crying like a child.

Even knowing full well that she will be breaking down in tears, there was nothing he could do, for such was his powerlessness.

Whereas, in spite of it all, the girl would will herself to stand up, for such was her noble purity.

All he could do was to gently cradle her to keep her from shattering, and, until she calmed, he would hold her firmly in his arms, and will not let go.

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It was after carrying the crying Emilia to Lewes' house, and making sure that Ram had put her to bed, that Subaru settled down and began to put everything, and his Return By Death, in order.

Ram, Otto, and the others inside all wanted to inquire about what had happened, but Subaru cut them off, saying [First, let's wait until Emilia wakes up], and so now he was alone.

Having withdrawn himself from the rest who still wanted to talk, he gazed up at the night sky outside of Lewes' house, allowing the wind to wash over him, while within Subaru's heart, complex calculations were taking place.

[Subaru: Still.....happened again, huh...]

Touching the left side of his waist, he felt for the wound that should have been there. A deep wound had been gouged out by a blade, where his intestines had spilled out. An opportunity to see one's own organs isn't something that happens to most people, he thought, and in that regard, he had probably surpassed most people in experience points. [Subaru: Whether or not I'm happy about it is a different story. I don't have some kind of deviant fetish where I'd get excited at the idea of seeing my own organs.....although someone I know might]

Coming to this point, the words flashed across Subaru's mind.

[—Didn't I tell you? Didn't we promise?]

He guessed it was that glamorous woman's voice. The blood-drenched, immorally glamorous voice, the voice of an abnormal person reaching ecstasy at the sight of life draining away.

Subaru abhorred that voice, that promise, and that perversion down to his very bones. On top of that, it was not the first time he had his belly torn open this way.

[Subaru: So here's where the "Bowel Hunter" makes her re-entry.....give me a break.....]

Putting his hand on his forehead, Subaru turned up to the sky and sighed.

In the back of his eyes, he saw that beautiful woman with long jet-black hair which was the same color as his own. That murderer, wielding wicked blades, who had already ended Subaru's life twice before. The menace who had driven Subaru into a corner in the First Loop, whom he had only driven away with Reinhardt's aid—— Elsa Granhiert.

[Subaru: I couldn't actually see her, but that was definitely Elsa. Or maybe I just don't want to believe there could be anyone else like that. Let's just stick with it being Elsa]

It felt like it had already been two months since their encounter, but in real time, it had only been less than a month. The wounds she had sustained back then were not light, but the aftereffects didn't seem to be enough to stop her from killing Subaru.

Was it because he was too easy, or perhaps she had completely healed?

[Subaru: It'll be safer to assume that she's healed. Come to think of it, the healing magic in this world seems to be able to heal pretty much anything besides death itself. Can't say how many times I would've died if..... Well, I actually did die, but]

Being almost dead and then coming out alive, and being almost dead and then actually dying had both happened to him so many times that, from his standpoint, it was a bit hard to grasp exactly where he stands on this.

But either way, Subaru had concluded that it was Elsa who had attacked the Mansion.

With that settled, the next question would be——

[Subaru: Why was Elsa in the Mansion, and what happened to Frederica and Petra?]

When Subaru arrived at the Mansion, there were still some signs of regular life left behind, such as the lamps in Petra's bedroom, and the lighting in the entrance hall. Not counting the office that led to the escape tunnel, the fact that the lights were on in the other two places meant that,

[Subaru: At least we know that nothing happened before that night..... right?]

He considered whether he had come to that conclusion too hastily.

There was also the possibility that those lights were simply left on all day and that Subaru was mistaken in his conclusion that nothing had occurred until that night. However, the key to rejecting that possibility lay in the amount of time the lamps could stay on.

[Subaru: Unlike Lagmite ore, the crystal lamps need to be charged up by absorbing mana from the atmosphere during the day. I know from personal experience that if you just leave them on, they won't last half the day.]

One night, while in the middle of learning the alphabets in the Mansion, the crystal lamp he had forgotten to turn off during the day suddenly went out. Subaru thought there was some paranormal phenomenon at work and made a huge fuss, and Ram would have blown him away if Rem hadn't gently caught him, and all the while, Emilia made herself small in a corner and started trembling. Subaru still couldn't help but smile thinking of that memory. But now was not the time to be nostalgic. So, just picking out the important part,

[Subaru: If the lights had been on during the day, it would be very odd for them to still be on at night. Thus, it should be alright to eliminate the possibility that the house was empty before that day. That means my time limit is.....the sixth night. This is the night of the second day, so there are four days left. No, three and a half days]

In terms of time, Subaru had about 84 hours remaining.

Within that limited time, the task imposed upon him this time was:

[Subaru: Defend the Mansion from the Bowel Hunter, or at least keep the people there safe]

There was no way to be sure whether or not the girls had been able to escape before that serpent-and-spider-esque killer arrived. He didn't know where the escape passage led, but if Frederica had escaped, they would most likely try to meet up with the master of the house, Roswaal, at the Sanctuary.

[Subaru: It could be the case that the escape passage is stupidly long and leads out to the middle of nowhere, and they escaped safely. Or.....]

He didn't want to think about it, but there was also the possibility that they hadn't been able to escape.

Considering the gap in fighting strength between the two sides, the possibility that Subaru didn't want to think about was more likely.

He furrowed his brows at the thought. But the fact is, from what Subaru had seen, Elsa's combat ability was certainly that high. Within his limited experience of this Parallel World, he had already met some very powerful people here. If that murderer were to be judged solely on her fighting ability alone, then.....

[Subaru: Stronger than Julius, but weaker than Wilhelm-san..... or thereabouts. And it pretty much goes without saying... not an opponent I can beat even if I try really hard]

Even under the best circumstances, Subaru's base-stats were too weak. If one were to compare them, it would not be an exaggeration to say that their difference in strength was like comparing a cat and a tiger. The chance of him winning alone was effectively zero.

During their last exchange, in the end, it was only a massive coincidence that saved him.

[Subaru: It would be great if the invincible Reinhart could just happen to pass on by right about now, but..... no matter how much of a contrived, overpowered, handsome main character he is, for him to suddenly show up at a time like this is asking a bit too much]

If this was a story Subaru was reading and the author tried to pull a stunt like that, Subaru would throw the book across the room. But since this was really happening, he would gladly welcome such an absurd development with open arms.

After giving in to the urge to entertain that escapist fantasy for a moment, Subaru chased it away with a single, quiet sigh.

[Subaru: Elsa's reason for coming to the mansion..... is most likely the same as last time, to disrupt the Royal Selection. After all, she's been hired by someone to get in Emilia's way]

In the capital, Emilia's Insignia was stolen by Felt. While Elsa was the one who hired Felt, the real mastermind was the one who had hired Elsa. By following the clues as to who would steal an Insignia from Emilia that qualified her for the Royal Selection, Subaru had once believed that it must be one of the other factions, but,

[Subaru: After seeing the other candidates.....I don't think I can be so sure]

First, looking at it from the angle of someone dispatching an assassin to steal an Insignia: Right from the start, Crusch could be taken out as a suspect. Having witnessed her heroic character first-hand, Subaru could guarantee that without a second thought. She was not the kind of person who would do such a thing.

Felt was naturally not a suspect either, so that leaves only Priscilla and Anastasia, but——

[Subaru: Priscilla.....would that haughty young lady really have a thing for cloak-and-dagger stuff? I could be mistaken, but she seems to be the kind of person who believes the whole world revolves around her. I don't think she'd go out of her way to do something like this. Then that just leaves Anastasia.....]

The purple haired merchant girl came to mind.

Underneath her gentle appearances, was the sheen of a sharp-nosed hunter, and an awareness of her surroundings that would allow her to turn any situation to her advantage. ——In fact, Subaru had made good use of that characteristic of hers.

If it really was her doing, perhaps she would have been choosing the most logical method to remove the opposition. Happily letting her imagination run wild and hiring a third party with gold to carry out some clandestine operation seemed to be her strong suit too. Only, if there was one factor that refuted that argument, it would be,

[Subaru: I just, don't think that Julius guy would overlook something like that. No no, it's not like I'm singling him out or anything. Right, yeah, just a gut feeling, that's all]

Or, perhaps she had managed to hide it from "The Greatest Knight". But the question remains, would she really risk creating an irreparable fissure within their otherwise perfect

master-servant relationship?

In the end, the theory of Anastasia's faction's involvement must also be rejected.

[Subaru: That accounts for all the suspects among the candidates. But even so, there is still more to think about. If we consider how people treat Emilia...]

If the culprit wasn't another Royal Selection candidate, then it could be someone from a faction that simply wanted to exclude Emilia from the Royal Selection. It would make sense if someone who despised the Half-Elf Emilia had chosen this as the most simplistic method.

But would anyone really go that far? Subaru must be naive to even entertain such a question. The hatred for her Half-Elf lineage was certainly that deep.

[Subaru: But if that's true, then there's virtually no chance of figuring out who her employer is. Unless Elsa herself spits it out]

And he didn't have the power to make her——so he was right back where he started.

In the end, the only possible way to deal with Elsa's attack would be,

[Subaru: It's kind of disturbing how weak our faction is. I'm completely useless. Otto doesn't even count. Emilia and Puck could put up a fight if only they were both around, and Ram's stamina becomes worrisome if we ever get into a drawn-out fight. Roswaal is injured, but it's not like he could be counted on anyways. I have no idea how strong Frederica is, but, unless maybe Petra has some kind of secret power and suddenly develops into a CHEAT CHARACTER.....that's not gonna happen. So basically,]

Subaru could think of two viable plans.

The first was to go back to the Mansion, get Frederica, Petra, Rem, and Beatrice and escape to the Sanctuary to avoid Elsa's attack.

The other option was,

[Garfiel: ——What're ya wastin' yer time out here fer?]

Coming out of the house, Garfiel looked down at Subaru, who was sitting on the ground leaning his back against the wall. Since he was so short, it was quite rare to see Garfiel looking down at him. Savoring the new experience, Subaru let out a [No], and shook his head,

[Subaru: I'm just putting my thoughts in order, thinking through some stuff. How's Emilia?]

[Garfiel: Princess-sama's still sleepin' like a log. She's sleepin' like "Mororoku nappin' for a whole day an' night"]

[Subaru: I don't know who that is, but sounds like Mororoku sleeps too much.]

Responding to the usual incomprehensible idiom, Subaru stood up and turned to face Garfiel.

Half a head shorter than Subaru, he had a head of short blond hair. Between his sharp eyes, there was a white scar on his forehead. His pointed canine teeth and his ferocious beast-like body gave off an otherworldly aura——and there was a confidence in himself which only the strong possessed.

Of the two plans that had come to mind for dealing with Elsa, the second one was this youth.

If they passed the Trials and released the Sanctuary, Subaru would be able to take him out of this place. Then, if he was as strong as he claimed to be, he would hopefully have enough strength to defeat Elsa. Rather than fleeing as a temporary measure, it would be better to repulse or even subjugate Elsa and remove the threat altogether.

[Subaru: Hey, Garfiel]

[Garfiel: The hell y'want?]

[Subaru: You're the strongest, aren't you? You're confident you'll never lose to anyone, right?]

[Garfiel: Haa? Yer damn right. Don't matter who it is. I'll crush'em, send'em flyin', kill'em dead and come out on top]

Although a bit annoyed by Subaru's question, Garfiel's confidence didn't waver for a bit. Encouraged by that response, Subaru nodded,

[Subaru: Once we get you out of the Sanctuary, there's something that'll require that strength of yours really soon. When that time comes, we're gonna have to rely on you to be the strongest]

[Garifel: What ya talkin' 'bout?]

[Subaru: Prove to me what you told me just now, ok? I'll be counting on you]

Patting the confused-looking Garfiel on the shoulder, Subaru headed back into Lewes' house. When he opened the door and stepped in, the three people inside——Ram, Otto, and Lewes, all focused their sights onto Subaru. With their gazes washing over him, Subaru turned his steps toward the room where Emilia was sleeping.

[Ram: Barusu, Emilia-sama is still...]

[Subaru: Hmm, I think she's woken up by now. ——Emilia-tan, I know you probably don't want to come out, but we need to talk. Everyone's waiting for you]

After calling through the door, he heard the faint sound of breathing coming from the other side.

Here was a brief hesitation. Then, after a few seconds had passed, the doorknob gently turned, and the door opened, revealing Emilia timidly standing behind it with her head slumped down.

[Emilia: Um.....Sorry I'm always causing you trouble. In the Tomb, and now as well.....]

[Subaru: Being troubled by Emilia-tan is no trouble at all. I want to do it, so it's fine. More importantly, are you feeling heavy or hurt anywhere? If you feel strange anywhere, I'll gently rub it for you and make it all better]

[Emilia: Mm. When I fell down I think I hit my waist or something so it aches a little bit.....]

[Subaru: Understood. I'll start to carefully..... Ram-san? Ram-san? The pointy end of your cane is jamming into my liver area!?!]

While Subaru was busy cracking a joke bordering on sexual harassment, Ram snuck up behind him, pulled out her cane, and jabbed him with it. When he pointed that out to her, she made no reply and only jabbed him harder, until Subaru yelped like a puppy and jumped out of the way.

[Ram: Emilia-sama, how are you feeling? Please forget Barusu's insolent remarks, and tell Ram everything about your physical condition]

[Subaru: What you're not even going to give a comment on what you did!? Look, I'm seriously kinda bleeding here. It even went through all these layers of clothes, just how much strength were you putting in?]

Subaru protested while rubbing at the jolting pain left over in his lower back. Ram only sent him a sidelong glance as if she was looking at an insect, and snorted [Hah]. Then, turning back to Emilia,

[Ram: Then you are alright, Emilia-sama? If there are no problems with your health, then.....]

[Emilia: A-ahuh, I'm fine. We have to.....talk about what happened during the Trial, don't we?]

Having guessed what Ram was going to say, Emilia nodded and stepped forward into the middle of the room. Garfiel soon came in as well, and so all the usual faces now circled around Emilia.

Then, under the gazes of everyone around her, Emilia stammered out an explanation of the Trial and its outcome, just as she did last time. If there was just one difference.....

[Otto: So then, how come Natsuki-san is alright after going inside?]

Otto raised his hand a little, and asked on behalf of everyone.

Until that question was raised, Subaru hadn't explained any of the information from his side. Part of it was because he wanted to hear Emilia's thoughts about the Trial, but also, [Subaru: I told you, didn't I? I got the Qualifications, so I can go inside. If you ask me where I got it from, it was probably when I went inside the Tomb yesterday afternoon. And as for what happened when I went inside..... I took the same kind of Trial Emilia-tan did. But it kinda looks like I passed mine]

Subaru's announcement ignited an uproar throughout the room.

Emilia, who had taken the same Trial and failed, was even more shocked than everyone else. She stared at Subaru in silence, with a baffled look in her violet eyes.

Subaru nodded to her, and,

[Subaru: Just to get this out of the way, the reason I passed the Trial wasn't because I was better or anything. The Trial was about facing your past. I've already made peace with mine beforehand, so it was basically just a BONUS STAGE for me]

[Lewes: I don't know what a "bo-nas" is, but if Su-bo passed the Trial.....hmph, that's a surprise]

[Ram: However, based on what Emilia-sama said, the Trial doesn't end with just one stage, correct? Since the word "first" was mentioned, one would expect there to be more]

Ram said this as Lewes seemed to accept it as it is. While nodding at them both, Subaru stole a glance at Emilia. She still kept her silence, and there were waves of complicated emotions carried within her eyes.

Subaru tried to imagine what she might be feeling inside her heart, but he soon shook away this naive notion.

There was the time limit imposed upon him on the one hand, and the difficulty of Emilia's Trial caused by her Past on the other. Having to balance the two at once, there weren't many options left to him. Therefore,

[Subaru: I heard something when I passed the Trial..... Apparently, if two challengers go in at the same time, the next Trial won't start. Then we'll have to wait for a different day to go in again]

[Ram:Hmm, which means?]

[Subaru: If Emilia-tan and I enter the Tomb together, Emilia-tan's Trial will start while my Trial..... basically, I won't be able to start the second Trial]

[Otto: W-wa-wait a minute, Natsuki-san]

Just as Subaru finished his sentence, Otto immediately cut himself in. Seeing Subaru pretending not to notice his unsettled gaze, he stuck his hand into his light-greyish hair, and,

[Otto: By the sound of what you just said, Natski-san, you're planning to challenge the Trials as well? But wasn't this whole thing supposed to set up an achievement for Emilia-sama so that.....]

[Subaru: Otto, you dumbass]

Subaru tried to stop Otto from blurting it all out, but it was too late. And Otto, realizing that he had just said something he shouldn't have, quickly covered his own mouth. But everyone else—— including Emilia, had already heard what he was trying to say.

Otto awkwardly held his breath, and Subaru stared at him with eyes of disdain. And Emilia, looking at them both from a distance,
[Emilia: What did you mean, just now?]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, let's calm down. That was uh.....]

[Emilia: Don't try to dupe me, tell me properly. ——Please, Subaru]

Emilia's eyes clung onto Subaru, pleading.

No boy would have had the heart to refuse a beautiful girl's tearfully-voiced plea, and he would not be Natsuki Subaru if he could refuse such a plea from Emilia. He wished he had the willpower to say no, but Subaru dropped his shoulders and abandoned his hesitation,
[Subaru: If Emilia-tan passes the Trials, the villagers of Arlam will be freed from being hostages, and the residents of the Sanctuary will be released from their bondage to this land. If you could overcome the Trials, you will gain the support of both of these two camps..... that was the real plan behind all this]

[Emilia:Is, that so. So you knew, Subaru?]

[Subaru: No no, I didn't notice anything at all until someone told me]

Seeing Emilia clearly shaken before him, Subaru held up his chest and brazenly lied. In front of Subaru's shameless lie, Ram and Otto looked at him as if they were chewing on something bitter, but Subaru hinted to them to keep quiet by shooting them both a glance. Then, turning back to Emilia,

[Subaru: All of it was Roswaal's plan. Honestly, I'm even suspecting whether his injuries are just a part of the performance]

[Emilia: Even Roswaal wouldn't go that..... why can't I finish that sentence. Looking at the situation now, it does seem like something he would do]

[Subaru: I'd hate to let everything go along with that guy's intentions..... I would be joking if I told you that was my main motivation, but that's definitely a part of it. But more than that.....]

Emilia looked confused, and lowered her head. Subaru bent down beside her to look up at her face from below, and saw her long eyelashes trembling with surprise.

[Subaru: I want to become your strength. I don't know what you saw when you faced your past, but if it brings you so much pain, so much heartache, and so many tears..... then I want to offer you my hand]

[Emilia:Subaru]

[Subaru: If the goal is to take the Trials and liberate the Sanctuary, then it's fine if I do it. If an achievement is needed, then you can have all of mine. My achievements are your achievements. No matter who it is, everyone has a past..... but nothing good comes out of believing that all of them have to be resolved]

Last time, in the World before his death, those were the words Garfiel had said to him. In front of Subaru, who had wanted Emilia to continue challenging the Trial even knowing the pain that facing her past would cause her, Garfiel had said this about the need to overcome the past.

That new perspective had struck Subaru like a thunder on a clear day.

Emilia widened her eyes in surprise, and bit her lips with an expression like she was sinking into thought.

Subaru understood why she would be conflicted. The truth is, deep down, she must be frightened of facing her past. But because she is so pure and noble, she wouldn't possibly consider pushing this burden onto someone else. And it was for this reason that she was so conflicted.

There was no way to say for sure that the remaining Trials wouldn't wound Subaru's heart just like her Past had wounded hers.

[Subaru: It's alright if you have to think about it. I understand it's not something you can decide right away. ——But if it's alright, I hope you can at least let me have one day tomorrow]

[Emilia: One day, tomorrow.....?]

[Subaru: Either way, I can't be the kind of devilish-instructor who drags an exhausted Emilia-tan into the Tomb like "Go take the Trials!" Since I still have plenty of energy left, I should be the one to go next, even if it's just to do a practice-run into the second Trial. And if I end up passing the Trial, that's even better, isn't it?]

If he could gain a single day, and then gain another day after that, then by passing the Trials as soon as he could, he could liberate the Sanctuary on the day after tomorrow. He would relieve Emilia's burden, accomplish his goal, and have enough time left over to save everyone at the Mansion. That would be the most ideal result.

Subaru knew that Emilia would be shaken by his proposal.

It bothered him to be deceiving her at a time when she was most vulnerable, but it's a technique in negotiation to throw down a large issue first before following it up with the smaller and more vital ones.

Since her mind was still not at ease, after hesitating to accept the first one, she would not be able to bring herself to deny his proposed concessions.

Tomorrow and the day after, Subaru will pass the Trials. There will surely be another opportunity to give Emilia the time to stand back up.

But that time isn't now. There isn't enough time, and the uncaring hand of Fate had——

[Garfiel: Y'expectin' us to just listen quietly while y'move the conversation along any way y'like?]

Just as Subaru's improvised tactic was about to succeed, a voice stopped him from behind.

The golden-haired obstructor narrowed his fierce emerald-green eyes, and, clacking his sharp canine fangs, took a step forward——

[Garfiel: I say, other than Princess..... Emilia-sama, I ain't agreein' t'anyone else takin' the Trials. At least, I defin'tly defin'tly defin'tly, ain't gonna let you be th'one to free us]

[Subaru: Wha——!?!]

Those were words he never expected to hear.

Subaru tried to make sense of the words that had been thrown at him, but unable to connect the speaker to the content of what was spoken, Subaru only groaned in confusion.

Watching as Subaru's eyes wavered, as if slamming down reality in front of someone who could not understand it,

[Garfiel: Y'listenin'? Do I have t'say it again? I ain't gonna approve of anyone other than Emilia-sama takin' the Trials. Get that into yer head, think of it as my condition, and not even the Granny's gonna change that]

Just like this, Garfiel crumpled up the skin of his nose, and spat this out with his displeasure in full display.

Chapter 25 [The Ice Forest]

[Garfiel: Lookin' like yer gonna cry ain't gonna change a thing. I've already made up my mind. And once I do I don't budge. It'd be like "Donmorakin gettin' stuck when y'push him"]

Watching Subaru's eyes open wide with astonishment, Garfiel continued.

The condition he spoke of——hearing it, threw Subaru's heart into a state of shock and disarray. Because,

[Subaru: Of all people, why are you the one saying this.....?]

[Garfiel: Huh? 'Sit so surprisin' I disagree? Just how naive are ya? All we did was talk a couple times, I'd be pretty pissed if y'think y'understand me]

At Subaru's words, Garfiel twisted the corners of his lips with displeasure, and Subaru did the same in return.

After all, what Garfiel had just rejected was based on something that Garfiel had suggested in the first place.

In the previous world, when Garfiel could no longer stand watching Emilia getting worn down from challenging the Trials over and over, he tossed up the idea that Subaru should take the Trials in her place. Subaru, who had obstinately believed that Emilia must be the one to overcome the Trials, was shaken to his core, and, after seeing sense in that idea, he had adopted it for himself. But now,

[Subaru: I've got all kinds of emotions swirling inside that I can't keep down but..... I'll forget them for now. But more importantly, why are you against it? Increasing the chances of liberating the Sanctuary can't possibly be bad for you?]

[Garfiel: Well, so yer sayin' if I'm fully on board with Granny's plans, then I should know yer idea's more efficient, that it? —But still, I just absolutely don't like it]

[Subaru: Why are you saying that like some snot-nosed brat.....!]

Crossing his arms, Garfiel turned his face away. There was no logic to what he was saying, and the fact that he was going purely on his feelings only complicated the conversation even further.

From their interactions up to now, Subaru understood that Garfiel was emotional—— or, more accurately, that his priorities are primarily based on what he feels like at the moment. If appealing to common-sense was useless, then Subaru didn't know what else he could do would be effective.

[Subaru: Lewes-san.....]

Since there was no point in talking to Garfiel, who had no intention of agreeing with him, Subaru called to the elderly woman in the body of a young girl who had been quietly watching their exchange. But seeing Subaru turn to her, Lewes only waved through her long sleeves that hid her hands underneath,

[Lewes: When Gar-bo's like this, there's nothing I can say to make him budge. It's unfortunate, but no matter how hard you try, there's nothing in the Sanctuary that can force him to listen. Does Su-bo want to try?]

[Subaru: I don't have the kind of suicidal tendencies that'll make me want to challenge a guy who can throw a dragon carriage..... Damnit, what's with you guys?]

She wasn't approving of Garfiel's words, but since she didn't actively rebuke him, it probably meant that deep down she agreed with him. Chances are, Lewes also believed that Emilia should be the one to overcome the Trials. He didn't know how much she respected Roswaal, but it seemed safe to assume that Lewes agreed with Roswaal on the most fundamental parts.

Nevertheless, Subaru couldn't help but wonder what would happen if Garfiel was on his side.

[Emilia:Subaru]

Calling him with a worried voice, Emilia looked up at Subaru who seemed to be overwhelmed by feelings he couldn't explain. Reflecting the side of Subaru's face within her violet eyes,

[Emilia: I-I'll try my best, so it's fine, you don't have to push yourself. It was a bit..... yeah, just a bit sudden, so I was surprised, but now that I know what is going to happen.....]

[Subaru: No, Emilia-tan, you're the one who shouldn't push yourself. I'll convince this stubborn bastard somehow. And once I do that, the Trials.....]

[Emilia: Subaru y——]

Emilia seemed like she was about to give in to Garfiel's words. Seeing her rally herself from her weakness, Subaru started churning in his head to think of some way to make them see reason. But, just as Subaru's mental preparation was getting underway, Emilia,

[Emilia: Subaru..... even you, don't believe I can do it?]

[Subaru:Huh?]

[Emilia: I-I know I let you see my useless side, so now you're thinking that..... you can't leave the Trials to me, so instead]

[Subaru: You're wrong. It's not like that]

[Emilia: Well, I know you're worried, Subaru. Subaru passed the Trial while I didn't even come close..... I don't even have the resolve to face..... the Trial, and my Past]

Even though Subaru was denying it, Emilia shook her head from side to side, refusing to accept his denial.

Negative emotions surfaced in her eyes, and her lips shivered as her face went pale.

From her unsettled speech, Subaru knew this was because she was recalling the Trial

and the so-called Past.

——In other words, she was at a point where she could very easily crumble.

[Subaru: You don't have to think about it——!]

[Emilia: But unless I face it I'll never overcome the Trials! Yes, that's right..... I have to overcome the Trials, I have to overcome my Past..... or I will never become King. And the villagers and the people of the Sanctuary will never be able to leave.....]

Taking her by the shoulders, Subaru desperately called out to her, but Emilia shook her head and did not seem to hear him. Or rather, the more he tried to stop her, the more obstinate her will seemed to become,

[Emilia: I can't let you babysit me forever, Subaru. I can't. Just not long ago, Subaru got hurt so badly because of me..... I, don't want to make you carry my burden anym.....]

[Subaru: It's fine that way. This might be a bad way of putting it, but you're already helping me as much as I'm helping you. It's all about putting the right materials to the right uses, right? I'm the one who has better the affinity when it comes to Trials. That's all there is to it, and nothing else. It just seems like something I can do, and something I can actually do faster. I don't find things I'm good at very often. There'll be plenty of opportunities for Emilia-tan to do your best later on]

[Emilia: Isn't this one of those huge opportunities now? If I always look away from unpleasant things, and keep running away..... then what will I become?]

——If only he could've screamed "What's wrong about running away."

If running away from things you don't like, shying your eyes away from painful things, and turning your back to difficulties could allow you to live in peace, then that's not such a bad way to live. Subaru himself had lived this way, trying to distance himself from hardships to the best of his ability.

So he knew—— that even though it's a cowardly way to live, there was no reason to condemn it.

But still, now. Right now, when Subaru should have understood and approved of the weakness facing up against Emilia's stubborn heart——

[Subaru: ————]

Why couldn't he utter a single word of what he was thinking?

In front of Subaru's silence, Emilia closed her eyes and turned down her face. His hands that were still on her shoulders could feel her body temperature rising as if she was having a fever, but Subaru didn't know what he could do.

And, watching their exchange,

[Garfiel: Hah. Yer free to fight it out as y'like, but listenin' from the side, sounds to me like Emilia-sama's got'a point? Fact is, the Trial's been prepared to be challenged by Emilia-sama. Suddenly stickin' yerself in's just.....]

[Subaru: You shut up! You..... you don't know anything yet.....!]

[Garfiel: Huh?]

Subaru exploded at Garfiel, who made it sound so easy without realizing what kind of feeling that was going through him. Faced with Subaru's rage, a dangerous aura began to emanate from Garfiel.

But once again, Subaru ignored his threat and glared at him fearlessly.

[Subaru: Do you have any idea what will happen if you keep pushing this on her? Do you think I can just calmly watch as she gets hurt, worn down, and falls apart?What would I be if I...]

[Garfiel:I don't get where you're coming up with this stuff all of'a sudden]

[Subaru: You're thinking in terms of conditions and merits, but did you think about Emilia herself even once? I know if she overcomes the Trials, the payoff will be huge. But, you're

not counting the wounds she'll get or the tears she'll shed to get there..... or what she herself wants]

In the previous world, even though he had seen, closer than anyone, how thin Emilia had been worn, how weakened she had become, Subaru never uttered a word to stop her. If it's her, if it's Emilia, then she will be able to do it. They had cornered her, pushed her beyond her limits, and only then had they realized it. There was no point trying to explain this feeling to someone who had not experienced it.

That was the curse of Return by Death that stabbed at Subaru this moment.

His situation was that only he knew the truth of what happened in the last world. Since neither his knowledge nor his words would suffice, the only thing he could do was to speak from emotions,

[Emilia: What..... do you know, Subaru?]

[Subaru: Emilia?]

Feeling a tug on his sleeve, Subaru lifted up his head and saw Emilia's eyes opened wide, staring at him. Emotions were swirling within her violet pupils, which were drowned in surging tear drops that would fall and disappear.

With tiny movements, Emilia shook her head from side to side, muttering [No, no.....] as if rejecting something.

[Emilia: Do you know? Subaru, do y.....do you know... about my Past?]

[Subaru: Wait, calm down. Take a deep breath. The conversation's just taken a bad turn, so...]

[Emilia: Wrong, you're wrong..... I didn't, mean to..... I, just..... just]

Once again, Emilia returned to the state she had been in within the Tomb, immediately after the Trial.

Confused, disoriented, beginning to ramble incoherently, her violet eyes that were wet

with tears reflected Subaru within them, without seeing him at all.

She reached out her fingers and clenched onto Subaru's sleeve as if she was going to tear it off,

[Emilia: I, Everyone..... even Mother, I..... but no, you're wrong. It's not true. It really isn't. At the time I..... really..... I]

[Subaru: Emilia, what are y.....]

Holding tight onto Subaru, Emilia desperately rambled on. Unable to understand the meaning behind her frantic words, Subaru could only pray that his sincere, meaningless consolation could get through to her.

When, in front of the helpless Subaru, a shadow suddenly moved. It was,

[Subaru: ——Ram]

Without stopping to respond to his call, Ram slid herself behind Emilia. Reaching out her hand, she gently covered Emilia's mouth. As the silver-haired girl's eyes widened in astonishment, Ram quietly uttered [Forgive me],

[Emilia:ah]

And suddenly, Emilia's body began to powerlessly collapse to the floor.

Immediately reaching out to Emilia who was falling right in front of him, Subaru breathed a sigh of relief as he managed to wrap her within in his arms. Then, looking up at Ram,

[Subaru: What did you do!?!]

[Ram: Only a quicker way to calm her down. Did that make Barusu mad?]

[Subaru: I wanted to say it was too forceful..... but I guess it was for the best. Sorry for all the trouble]

[Ram: It's strange that Barusu would be apologizing on Emilia-sama's behalf. Since when did you take over the Great Spirit-sama's position as Emilia-sama's protector?]

[Subaru: It's not like I was.....]

"Trying to", was what he was about to say. But Subaru realized that it would have been an unconvincing rebuttal.

Since for one reason or another Puck was refusing to show his face, it was true that Subaru was looking out for Emilia even more than usual. And now, knowing that challenging the Trials was wearing her down, that feeling had only increased.

And for Emilia, now that the Great Spirit who had always protected her was no longer at her side, she was relying on Subaru more than ever before.

In any case,

[Garfiel: If she's gotta be taken care of, the talk ends here]

Watching Subaru cradling Emilia, who had been forced asleep by Ram, Garfiel snorted and spat this out.

Subaru was about to raise his voice to object, but, feeling Emilia's small movements in his arms, he unwittingly shut his mouth. And so, having lost his chance, he did nothing more except watch as Garfiel turned his back to leave.

[Garfiel: Today's Trial's the exception. From t'morrow onwards, th' one t'take the Trials'll be Emilia-sama. I won't accept ya takin' em]

Baring his fangs, Garfiel spoke his part and left Lewes' house. And, the tiny shadow behind him—— Lewes, continued,

[Lewes: Sorry, Su-bo. But I'm of the same opinion. The earlier the Sanctuary is liberated the better, but..... it would be more convenient to stick to Ros-bo's intentions]

[Subaru: What do you mean, it would be more convenient.....]

[Lewes: Even if the Sanctuary is liberated, it doesn't change the fact that we will continue to be Ros-bo's subjects, under his protection. So, it would be in our best interest to avoid

going against him if possible.I hope you do not think badly of me, it was not my intention to be selfish]

Realizing that Lewes' words must have represented the true thoughts of the residents of the Sanctuary, Subaru lost all room to object. After Garfiel and Lewes of the Sanctuary-camp left the room, the only ones remaining were the odd-bunch members of Roswaal's Mansion, plus one extra.

[Subaru: So, plus-one-extra Otto, what do you think of this situation?]

[Otto: I got the worst feeling about where this is going and I intend to keep quiet and let this pass, so would you mind not dragging me into this?But, if I were to give my honest opinion after listening to that conversation, I think Garfiel is right]

Otto lifted up a finger as he said this, nodding several times while watching Subaru kneel down,

[Otto: It would make more sense, whether it's for the Margrave's aims, or for Emilia-sama's as a Royal Selection candidate. I'm sure if Natsuki-san takes the Trials in her place, it could be made to become Emilia-sama's achievement, but..... regardless of how other people hear about it in the future, will the people who are currently stuck in the Sanctuary really think of it this way? And will it really win her their support?]

[Subaru:I understand that too. No matter which way I think about it, letting Emilia be the one to liberate the Sanctuary will be most beneficial, but.....]

[Ram:but Emilia-sama is incapable of overcoming the Trials?]

Ram's words kicked right through Subaru's indecisive muttering. Yet, in front of her refreshingly blunt attitude, Subaru grew calm.

[Subaru: As far as I can tell, I think it'd be too much to expect quick results. I don't know what exactly happened in Emilia's past..... but I'm sure you both understand that we don't have that kind of time, don't you?]

[Ram: At the very least, I would like to see this end within three years before the Royal Selection is decided]

[Subaru: That's being way too patient about this!]

That was probably some kind of joke, and since she said it with a straight face, he could pretty much rule out the possibility that she was being serious. As if understanding Subaru's meaning, she nodded,

[Ram: There is also the burden of the refugees, and the matter of food supplies. Looking at this in the long term, it's unrealistic to keep sustaining this many people]

[Subaru: Well, that's the gist of it. They're already stressed out as it is after being suddenly forced to evacuate. If they stop receiving enough food on top of that, their discontent will explode. And for the Sanctuary guys, there'll be no point in keeping the hostages if their own living standards start dropping because of it ——at least, there'll be no point in keeping all of them]

[Ram: You think Garf will start culling the villagers?]

Ram's voice became slightly more animated as she asked this.

Subaru raised his brows at her rather unexpected reaction, and even she herself seemed to be surprised about her own attitude. But, stroking her forelocks in order to distract away from it,

[Ram: I would rather not think about it, but with Garf's personality, it is possible. If it really comes down to it, he won't hesitate to follow his own priorities]

[Subaru: He's kinda like you in that. My opinion's the same.So, I'd like to suggest that we free the hostages from the Sanctuary before that happens]

Last time, that proposal was accepted on the secret condition that Subaru would take the Trials. Since that won't work this time, he could expect it to be far more difficult to negotiate the same terms. But even so, he was sure that he could win some concessions in the end,

[Subaru: In any case, if the Sanctuary guys are going to push Emilia into taking the Trials no matter what, hopefully I can do something to make things easier for both sides]

[Ram:I'm surprised. I thought Barusu would be more opposed to it and behave like an unreasonable little child]

Seeing Subaru apparently put away his worries about Emilia taking the Trials, Ram made this brief comment. Subaru nodded, and started off again with [Well],

[Subaru: It's regrettable and unfortunate..... but it makes the most sense to go along with Roswaal's plans. Yeah, that's right. If I can overlook the fact that Emilia will be hurt, then it's definitely for the best if we do it this way]

[Ram: Even knowing that she'll be hurt, you'll let her go on with it? What a demon you are]

[Subaru: To have real demon tell me that, I must really have changed. Except.....no, nevermind]

He was about to say something, but Subaru closed his mouth again and shook his head. Seeing that he wasn't going to continue, Ram furrowed her brows, but didn't bother commenting on it.

Gently, being careful not to wake her, Subaru lifted up Emilia in his arms.

She was light. People were supposed to be heavier when they are unconscious, but she

was still as light as a feather.

Just how much must she be carrying within this small, delicate body, he wondered.

[Subaru: Ram. After I set Emilia down in the bedroom, I want to talk to Roswaal. Is that alright with you?]

[Ram: Roswaal-sama is resting. No one may enter his room for the time b.....]

[Subaru: I want to talk to him about the Trial. We won't get anywhere if we low-ranking guys just keep talking amongst ourselves. I need the mastermind's opinion on this]

If he used the Trials as bait, then even Roswaal will have to take down the "Do Not Disturb" sign on his door and meet him face to face. Subaru already had experience of this from the previous world.

Ram closed her eyes for a moment to scrutinize Subaru's words, until, looking as if she was very tired, she spilled out a sigh,

[Ram: I will wait at Roswaal-sama's side. Barusu, please take Emilia-sama to her bed.....without doing anything suspicious]

[Subaru: What are you saying to SERIOUS MODE me over here? I wasn't even thinking anything until you went and said that, and now that I am acutely aware of the soft DIRECT CONTACT sensation with Emilia-tan, my knees are shaking out of control! How are you going to take responsibility??]

[Ram: Otto, keep an eye on him]

[Otto: Yes ma'am!]

Ignoring Subaru's jape, Ram left a simple order for Otto and exited the house. Now the only ones left were two guys and one pretty girl. Under such circumstances, Otto kept up his saluting pose and stared at Subaru closely.

[Otto: Go on, please take Emilia-sama to the bed. Unless you need any help?]

[Subaru: Before that, what's with this obedient attitude you're taking toward Ram.....]

[Otto: Well, see, Ram-san's a direct subordinate of the Margrave, right? With that in mind, unlike Natsuki-san singlemindedly sticking to Emilia-sama, if I suck up to Ram-san instead, I'll have a better hope of getting close to the Margrave, won't I? Heheh]

[Subaru: Your initial impression as a skilled merchant is slowly shifting into a sly minor-villain, you know! Aren't you going to do something to salvage it? Will I have to treat you like an obstacle from now on and quietly kill you off in the shadows?]

Complaining about Otto's identity shift, Subaru sighed, and carried Emilia into the bedroom. He lightly smoothed out the messy bedsheet with his palm, and slowly laid her down. When,

[Subaru: Ah.....]

After drawing the bedsheets to her shoulders, just as he was about to leave, Subaru noticed Emilia's fingers clutching to the hem of his shirt. Sensing the reliance conveyed through the touch of her fingertips, taking in her adorableness, Subaru gently picked her fingers away. Then, wrapping them up within his hands,

[Subaru: Wait for me, Emilia]

[Emilia: ————]

[Subaru: Somehow, I'll find a way. So that you will no longer have to cry, or be hurt anymore. I promise]

Saying this oath, Subaru released Emilia's hand.

Standing up, and turning around, he headed for the house's exit. ——And to Roswaal. Because there were far too many things he must hear from the devil himself.

[Roswaal: ——I see, I think I mo~re or less understand the situa~tion now]

Touching a hand to his jaw, after quietly listening to Subaru's long speech, Roswaal nodded his head.

The location was in a room of the private residence where Roswaal was resting, and the only two people inside were Subaru and Roswaal. Lying on the bed, Roswaal lifted his upper body to get a better look at Subaru. And Subaru, shooting him a stern gaze in return,

[Subaru: That why, if we incorporate the Sanctuary side's interests as much as possible, I think this would be the best starting point to launch the negotiations]

[Roswaal: A~~hah, it is true, that from the moment Emilia-sama entered within the Barriers of the Sanctuary, Garfiel and the others' plans might as well have already been realized. Emilia-sama herself cannot leave the Sanctuary until she overcomes the Trials. So if the hostages they have taken for insurance simply become useless baggage draining their food supply, then there is reason to let them go..... that is the idea?]

[Subaru: I think it's a sensible argument. Of course, we won't be throwing away or putting off the Sanctuary's problems. This is just to take the unnecessary components out of the equation]

[Roswaal: Sounds almost too good to be true. Deep down, you have such doubts too, no? If the liberation of the Sanctuary ever becomes far beyond reach, or, if Emilia-sama falters, and her heart could no longer withstand the Trials, then the hostages can be used as a resource to coerce Emilia-sama. Perhaps that is why you thought you'd eliminate that possibility beforehand..... or something along those lines?]

With one eye closed, Roswaal looked at Subaru through his single yellow pupil. Subaru crossed his arms as he took in the contents of those words, and then, nodding,

[Subaru: Sorry, but, I didn't really think that far. Or actually, the fact that you managed to immediately come up with that terrifying idea kinda makes me want to recoil a bit]

[Roswaal: A~~ah it di~~d? Was I thinking too much into it? Sorry. Bu~~t still, that is another way to thi~nk about it, no?]

Roswaal smiled as if to cover up the fact that he had surprised even himself with his pessimism. Seeing that smile, Subaru only looked at him wryly in return, and wondered whether Garfiel was really capable of going that far.

No matter how stubborn or inflexible he was, and even if there were times when words can't get through to him, he wasn't the kind of person who would stain his hands with something truly irrational or immoral.

Subaru had only known him for a few days, but that was his assessment of Garfiel.

In any case,

[Roswaal: So? What would you ha~ve me do, Subaru-kun?]

[Subaru: If possible, instead of me, I want you to be the one to propose these terms. This time, it looks like..... things won't end well if I do it]

[Roswaal: And wh~~y is that?]

[Subaru: I have a feeling that bastard Garfiel's got a thing against me. It's not that I've given up on convincing him, but it's going to get rough if I go talk to him today or tomorrow]

Subaru could still remember the sharpness of the gaze Garfiel had given him when they parted.

Filled with hostility and disdain, it was as if those eyes were looking at someone who killed his parents—— though Subaru had no clue why he would look at him this way. Had he done something that Garfiel deemed impermissible, or had he mistakenly said something that trampled on his beliefs? Either way,

[Subaru: Now that he's gotten emotional, he'll probably reject my ideas no matter what it is. And on top of that, if Garfiel objects, it seems Lewes-san will passively go along with him as well. I can already see that happening, so I hope we can avoid that possibility]

[Roswaal: So that's where I come in, is that correct? Well, alright. I will speak to granny-Lewes-sama and Garfiel. Although, it seems Garfiel dislikes me as well, so even I'm not sure if I could convince him]

Upon receiving Subaru's proposal, Roswaal lightheartedly accepted the task.

Hearing that encouraging reply, Subaru breathed a sigh of relief. Anyways, one of his worries had been resolved for now. Then, the remaining problem would be...

[Roswaal: Well~ then. Is that all the business you have with me?]

[Subaru: No, not yet. ——I haven't brought up the most vital issue yet]

The most important conversation that was the reason he came here hadn't even begun. Roswaal tilted his head, and, closing a single eye, he brushed his long, flowing hair behind his back. Subaru wasn't sure if it had become a habit, but he would inadvertently straighten his back whenever he was stared at by that yellow eye.

Then,

[Subaru: The Trial inside the Tomb showed Emilia her Past. Do you have any idea what that Past might be, that was so painful for her to look back on?]

Subaru asked this question about the past that Emilia was desperately trying to hide.

And, receiving this question, Roswaal closed his yellow eye, and slightly inclined his head as though sinking into thought. Just like this, the room fell into silence, and the only sound Subaru could hear in that muted world was the sound of his own anxiety as he waited.

Then,

[Roswaal: Don't you think that asking me, instead of asking Emilia-sama directly, is a rather cowardly way to do it?]

[Subaru: You can call me an underhanded coward as much as you like. And I would certainly rather hear everything from Emilia herself if I could. But...]

The secret that she was trying to hide even with all the tears and all the pain, how could Subaru bring himself to ask her?

But even if he could understand why she wanted keep it secret, just as he himself wanted to hide his pain about his parents, he mustn't hesitate.

[Subaru: It's because I want to know about her, and because I have to know. And if there is anything I can use, I will grasp at any straws I can]

[Roswaal: I've had people call me all sorts of things, but to be treated like stra~~w certainly is a new experience for me..... Alri~~ght, then]

After letting out a small laugh, Roswaal's expression disappeared.

He exhaled a short breath, and then stopped breathing altogether as he took in Subaru through both of his mismatched pupils. Placing him under the gazes of those different-colored eyes, Roswaal touched his raised hand to his forehead, and,

[Roswaal: Emilia-sama is a Half-Elf. A~nd due to the Witch of Envy, the Half-Elves are looked upon with discrimination. Thi~s much, even yo~u must already know, isn't tha~t right?]

[Subaru:Yeah. I can tell how unfairly Emilia must have been treated from the way she acted in the Capital. And when I met those assholes as well]

The images of those abominable Witch Cultists came to mind. Watching Subaru trying to shake that out of his head, Roswaal continued with [Howe~~ver],

[Roswaal: While it's true that Half-Elves are the targets of particularly severe pe~~rsecution..... it does not end there..... By the way, Subaru-kun, did you ever see an Elf while you were in the Ca~pital?]

[Subaru: Elf? Not just Half-Elf?No, I don't think I've ever seen one]

Holding his chin, Subaru mobilized his memory to look through the different worlds he had seen. But never once, within all those worlds, had an Elf—— or the fair, long-eared

features of the popular impression of that race ever crossed into his memories.

Hearing Subaru's reply, Roswaal simply remarked [Right],

[Roswaal: The Half-Elves aren't the only ones being harshly persecuted throughout all parts of the world. The Elves, for being, in part, the sires of Half-Elves, are also at the end of the spear]

[Subaru:! But, that's way too indiscriminate no matter how you look at it. If you follow that logic, then.....]

[Roswaal: Humans would also have to be eradicated? Unfortunately, in this world, Humans are far more numerous than the Demihumans, and their nations are far more powerful. It was only owing to the sheer magnitude of the ever expanding rift between the Humans and the Demihumans, that the "Demihuman War" had dragged on for so long. But that has little to do with the topic at hand]

[Subaru: So then, what does the history of persecution against Elves have to do with this?]

The Demihuman War was a phrase he had never heard before. Although he was intrigued, Subaru decided to get back to the original topic before they ran off on a tangent. Roswaal drew in his chin and with [In other words], he shook his head and continued,

[Roswaal: Naturally, it would be difficult for Half-Elves to show their faces in a place like the Capital, and the Elves, being their parent race, shared the same difficulty. That would be why you have not seen any Elves inside the Capital]

[Subaru: That part..... I get already. But, how is that connected to this?]

Roswaal appeared unconcerned about Subaru's request for an explanation. Leaning his back against a pillow, and, feeling its softness pushing against his back, he slightly lifted his head, looking up,

[Roswaal: As an extension of the prejudice against Half-Elves, the Elves are also met with repression where~ver they go. In that case, just whe~re should the Elves live?]

[Subaru: If they're Elves..... I get the feeling they'd live in a camp inside a forest or something. Keep to some part of the forest that's inaccessible to people, and quietly hunt and stuff]

[Roswaal: I don't know where you got all that information, but it is roughly along those li~~nes. The Elves were chased away from the towns, and so they could only live secretly in the depths of the fo~rests. ——The Great Forest of Elinor, was once one of these homes to the Elves]

All of a sudden, Subaru noticed a change in Roswaal's voice, and couldn't keep himself from shuddering.

It felt as though the temperature of the room had suddenly dropped, but, naturally, it was only an illusion. And the real reason must have been Roswaal in front of him, and the indescribable power carried within his words.

As for the name of that place, Subaru had a feeling that he had heard it before.

——The Great Forest of Elinor. That name had come up several times over the course of negotiations in Crusch's mansion. They had mentioned that it is a territory within Roswaal's domains rich in magical minerals. And that,

[Subaru: It's now frozen in ice, and no one could go near it.....]

[Roswaal: The beginning of the freezing of the Great Forest of Elinor, and its subsequent spread, is recorded as an event that happened over ninety years ago. All was frozen, and all living things were sealed in ice, in a world of absolute zero. ——And she lived in that world, all alone]

As if confirming Subaru's fears, the usual strange intonations disappeared from Roswaal's voice.

Ninety years. An exceeding long time. And who was that person? From the flow of the conversation up to now, only one answer appeared in his mind.

And, seeing Subaru at loss for words, Roswaal plainly told him.

[Roswaal: ——In the depths of the Great Elior Forest, the village and the villagers of the Elven tribe that resided there remain frozen in ice even to this day, stopped in time]

[Subaru: ————]

[Roswaal: All except one, all except the Half-Elf girl who committed this mistake.....]

Chapter 26 [Impaction]

——He never should have asked.

Feeling a cold sweat rolling from his forehead to his jaw, Subaru once again recognized the extent of his own stupidity.

A distant-sounding ring was reverberating inside his skull, and his thumping heart groaned in pain.

[Roswaal: After hearing all of this, you are starting to regret it..... ar~~en't you?]

Watching Subaru sink into silence, on the bed, Roswaal tilted his head.

Being asked this question by the clown playing with his long blue hair, Subaru couldn't immediately come up with a reply. All he could do was to breathe quietly to calm himself down, and,

[Subaru: I was just, surprised, that's all. How should I say it..... Emilia is, a bit older than I thought]

[Roswaal: Oya, didn't you know? Emilia-sama, being Half-Elf, is a member of a race blessed with long life, though it would not be as long as the Elves. As for the Elves, you could say that unless they are killed, they would pretty much ne~~ver die]

Going along with Subaru's evasive reply, Roswaal gave a similarly half-hearted explanation.

The characteristics of the Elves as Roswaal described them did seem to match the subculture-understanding of Elves in the original world. Subaru wasn't sure how much the "Half" part came into, but, at least on the point of Emilia's true age, assuming Roswaal's words could be believed——

[Subaru: There's at least a 60-year gap Even with my older-sister-complex, I'm a bit lacking in experience points when it comes to that kind of a age gap in a potential conquest target]

[Roswaal: This is unrelated, but..... from the way you said that, it sound as if you've had contact with other long-lived races besides Emilia-sama befo~~re?]

[Subaru: Well, immortals and vampires are pretty common character tropes in GAL-GAMES, you know. Loli-Granny Lewes-san's a type as well..... such are the sins of past life]

Although, Non-Humans and Loli-Granny-types weren't really a part of Subaru's undertakings. Subaru's STRIKE-ZONE was usually situated around older sisters and senpais at school.

That's why, when he learned that there was actually a 60-year age gap, he more or less had some thoughts about it,

[Subaru: But since she's cute, I'm OK with it. NO-PROBLEM. Emilia-tan is still the brightest star in my heart!]

Besides, since long-living races live for a long time, they probably grow at a slower rate, and so they probably mentally mature at a different rate as well. He's seen that pretty often in these kind of character setups.

Kind of like how dog age is different from human age, 20 years old in human age is probably like 200 years old in Elf years. Then——

[Subaru: If I think of it that way, 90 years old Emilia-tan is still young, just a little girl..... no, from the Elves' point of view, she's might actually be a Loli. Oyoy, if such a sexy beautiful girl is only a Loli..... that's a whole new genre isn't it!]

[Roswaal: Even though indulging in various kind of fantastical delu~~sions is a good thing, the reality is ha~~rsher than you imagined. With the passage of time, people will grow. Even the minds of Elves would not mature any slower a~~t all]

[Subaru: You... I'm desperately trying to convince myself Emilia-tan is a little girl here, why do you have to immediately disprove me.....]

Even though it was just wishful thinking, it was still annoying to have his last hope pulverized right off the bat. Under Subaru's resentful leer, with [Besides], Roswaal continued,

[Roswaal: E~~~ven I can't just stand by while watching you cover your o~~wn eyes and pretend nothing ha~~ppened. Ri~~ght, Subaru-kun?]

[Subaru: ————]

[Roswaal: Having heard from me what you sho~~uldn't have heard, do you regret it so much?]

[Subaru:You, really are an annoying guy]

Despite Subaru trying to gloss it over, just as he was about to bury it away, Roswaal just had to dig it all up again. After tossing back this limp retort, Subaru cursed at himself one more time.

That heavy cross borne upon Emilia's delicate shoulders—— he had dishonestly heard it from someone other than herself.

[Subaru:In the Trial I saw my past. I'm sure Emilia saw hers too. In that case, the past she saw must have been.....]

[Roswaal: If it is the past one least wishes to look back upon..... then the one Emilia-sama saw was no doubt the day when the Great Eltor Forest fro~ze]

Roswaal confirmed Subaru's fears.

Carrying on from this train of thought, Subaru came to realize just what horror he had been forcing Emilia to go through.

There is much to gain from finding closure, and overcoming one's past——but...

[Subaru: Then, all that time, I've been making her face the past where she froze everyone in ice.....?]

Between Emilia and Subaru, the magnitude of the guilt attached to their forsaken pasts were worlds apart.

Of course, it was difficult for Subaru to come to terms with the fact that he was cut off from his parents by an entire world between them. And he would not forgive himself if he cheapened that experience, or saw it as anything less than it was.

But on the other hand, what about Emilia's problem?

Whereas Subaru was loved by his parents, received a push on his back, and was forgiven, would the past that Emilia had to face grant her this affirmation, and forgive her for her mistake?

Would she receive this, and move on from her past?

[Subaru: Emilia freezing the forest..... and the Elven village inside, is all of this certain? It sounds as if there's no room for debate, but something feels off.....]

[Roswaal: It's true that we can't be sure what really happened. But, this was told to me directly by Emilia-sama herself. It was Emilia-sama herself who confessed to be the one who sealed the forest in ice. That much, shouldn't leave room for any further contention?]

[Subaru: So if you aren't sure what really happened, it could just be a misunderstanding..... To begin with, Emilia-tan isn't the kind of person who could do such a thing.....]

[Roswaal: No no~, you misunderstand, that won't do~, Subaru-kun]

While Subaru was trying to search for some excuse, Roswaal held him back with three drawn-out calls. Having been cut off this way, Subaru shot him a sharp and perilous glare. But Roswaal only waved his hand, pretending not to notice it,

[Roswaal: The fact of what actually happened, is not the issue here. The real issue is the fact that Emilia-sama is firmly convinced of the idea, "I am the one who froze the forest"]

[Subaru: ————]

[Roswaal: To Emilia-sama, this is the truth of what happened. Consequently, the Trial which Emilia-sama must face is also based upon this version of the truth. ——In tha~~~t case, just what do you think we should do?]

[Subaru: You..... what are you even thinking?]

Asking this question as if they were playing some lighthearted game, it was impossible to fathom what was going through Roswaal's mind. As if he couldn't take it anymore, Subaru wrenched out these words.

Just how... how could this man keep smiling in a situation like this?

[Subaru: I don't expect you to sympathize with Emilia's past, or feel for her or anything of the sort, but..... if you know full well the weight of that burden, and know what pain must be going through her heart, then what the hell are you doing having so much fun while she is sent in to challenge the impossible Trials?]

[Roswaal: Fu~~~mu]

[Subaru: What is wrong with you!? You..... don't you want Emilia to be King? You are the one who is going to make her King, aren't you? I know what you are trying to do. You think letting Emilia liberate the Sanctuary will win her the support of both Arlam village and the Sanctuary..... that I understand.....]

But,

[Subaru: On the other hand, when it comes down to the critical moment you're just leaving Emilia to her own devices. If she cannot liberate the Sanctuary, then the whole game falls apart..... how can you just sit around as if there's nothing to worry about when the situation has come to this deadlock!]

[Roswaal:]

[Subaru: I've said it before. I won't rest until I've made Emilia King. And I intend to make that true..... As for you, do you really intend to make her King?]

[Roswaal: ——Without a doubt]

Roaring, his shoulders trembling, Subaru asked Roswaal this heartfelt question. But, at the end of his last question, Roswaal's answer came down like a bucket of cold water on his seething face.

In front of his eyes, Roswaal didn't move an inch—— with steady eyes, his gaze was fixed dead upon Subaru. Then, he,

[Roswaal: Do I intend to make her the King? Certainly, I do. ——Other than myself, there is no one else who would wish more for her to be King. Not even Emilia-sama herself, or a man like you, can match my desire for this, or the reason for my conviction]

[Subaru: Ros.....waal?]

[Roswaal: That you would hound me like this, and doubt my motivations, is truly laughable. Absolutely, laughable. ——Are we still not there yet, after all?]

There was rage in his quiet words, and it was the first time Subaru ever sensed this from Roswaal.

But, halfway through, the heat vanished from his impassioned words, until, at last, it fell to a whisper and scattered like mist. In the end, with a final profound musing, he brought his speech to a close, and,

[Roswaal: Subaru-kun. Unfo~~tunately, this will be all for tonight. I a~~m still recovering from my wo~unds. At least, I hope you'd grant me a little re~st]

[Subaru: We're..... no, nevermind]

Subaru reached out his hand, trying to hold Roswaal back from one-sidedly ending the conversation, but he realized it would be futile, and drew it back again.

Ending their talk in a lighthearted tone, Roswaal plainly refused any further discussion.

Since he had already been rejected this way, even though the person was still lying in the bed right in front of him, it was already too late to ask anything more.

Shaking his head, holding back his disappointment, Subaru turned his back to the bed. He had already said what he came here to say. Whether or not the situation of the villagers of Arlam would change for the better is still unknown, but Lewes will probably not refuse Roswaal's request.

If that much can be done, then the stagnating circumstances will at least move forward. Even though, for Subaru, there were still many more hurdles to come.

[Roswaal: ——Subaru-kun]

Just as he was about to leave the room, Roswaal's call stopped him. Halting his legs, and looking back, he saw that Roswaal had already laid his head down on the pillow, and was not looking at him.

[Roswaal: The Qualification... you've received it?]

[Subaru: Ah. Yeah, haven't I mentioned it yet? Yeah. I took the Trial too. Actually, if going inside is like getting baptized with that stuff, then maybe you could.....]

[Roswaal: ——No~ no, that will not be possible. I'm afraid the Tomb will not accept me. The fact that I carry these scars of rejection should make that clear enough]

Having glossed over the part about the Qualification, and recalling their conversation from the previous world, Subaru raised his brows in astonishment. In the previous world, when he told Roswaal that he had challenged the Trials, he could remember Roswaal's expression turning terribly dark.

But this time, there was only a tinge of loneliness that didn't seem noteworthy at all.

[Roswaal:Choose what is best, Subaru-kun]

[Subaru: What?]

[Roswaal: In this place, you are the one person who could move most freely. You are completely unbound by the Sanctuary. Nor are you constrained by any obligation to the Royal Selection]

[Subaru: —————]

[Roswaal: Go on being guided by your desires, go on struggling, until you hold everything within your hands. To agonize, and to be lost, and only then can you obtain it..... Even if it would not satisfy you, even if you could not understand it, see it through to the end]

Roswaal said this without showing his face. Without the usual clownish intonations, Subaru was stunned by these uncharacteristically cynical remarks, and could only stand there stupidly on the spot.

Until, after a little while had passed, he suddenly realized that Roswaal had been saying those words to himself.

[Subaru: Hey..... that's, not like you at all. What's wrong, Ros-chi?]

[Roswaal: Sometimes I want to try something different, tha~~t's all. ——I suppose, it seems I didn't ma~ke it]

There was no way he could understand that open-ended sentence. But, just as he was about to ask, Roswaal waved his hand on the bed, urging Subaru to leave.

Seeing this, standing in front of Roswaal, who had turned away from him, Subaru let out a long, drawn out sigh through his nostrils,

[Subaru: Good night]

And, leaving this behind, he stepped out of the room.

[Ram:You didn't impose any burdens on Roswaal-sama, I hope?]

The first thing that greeted Subaru as he came out of the bedroom were these words of interrogation and Ram's sharpened stare.

The pink-haired girl was about half a head shorter than Subaru, but on matters that concerned Roswaal, her intimidating presence would make her body appear twice as big as it actually is. In any case, Subaru started shriveling under the immense pressure.

[Subaru: We just calmly talked about some stuff, that's all. There were no collar-grabs or wrestling throws or anything, don't worry]

[Ram: What an optimistic Barusu. Setting foot inside the Tomb, only to be rejected, do you realize how cruel that was to Roswaal-sama..... You don't even understand that much, and have the audacity to be a smartass about it?]

Ram didn't conceal her displeasure as she blasted back at Subaru for his response. Seeing her priorities clearly laid out, Subaru couldn't help but smile wryly, and,

[Subaru: Well he was gonna go to sleep, so I kinda got kicked out..... I already said what I had to say, so it's fine]

[Ram: Is it.At least, if Roswaal-sama makes the request, I think Lewes-sama will probably accept. But as for Garf..... I don't know how he will react]

[Subaru: If he's gonna grumble, then we'll have to rely on your seduction skills. You just have to strike a cute pose and..... you know how to do that, right?]

[Ram: Isn't Ram cute already?]

[Subaru: No I mean, well, if it's just the outer appearance then it's pretty cute.....]

After all, aside from the hair color, she looked exactly like Rem. Very very cute. The only problem was that the cuteness and Ram's fresh-personality kind of managed to cancel each other out.

[Subaru: But to go after you, Garfel sure has some bizarre tastes. No, or, maybe it's just hard to tell from the appearance..... kind of like the puffer fish, you kn-OWOWOW!]

[Ram: I am pretty sure that wasn't a compliment, so this is how I am responding, Barusu]

Stomping on Subaru's toes with her heel to her heart's content while watching tears jerking out of his eyes, Ram huffed through her nose. Then, she stood in front of the door to Roswaal's bedroom, and,

[Ram: Ram will change Roswaal-sama's bandages, and then rest for the night. I suppose Barusu will sleep in the Cathedral like yesterday? Even a Barusu should be able to remember a simple location, I assume?]

[Subaru: My sense of direction's surprisingly good, you know. Besides, it's the biggest building here. Although having no street lights is kind of a pain]

The Sanctuary was an undeveloped area that relied on starlight to light the way at night. But still, on clear nights, the light descending from a star-filled sky was often enough to keep the darkness at bay. Unfortunately, it's cloudy today.

Looking out the window, aside from the sprinkles of glimmering lights from the village houses, all the rest was completely dark.

He felt just a little, tiny unease about the road back home.

[Subaru: Getting lost and wandering into the forest and getting a random encounter with a BEAST and then going into BADEND—— probably won't happen, right? It's ok, it's ok]

[Ram: The possibility of that happening was very low to begin with, but after you said that out loud it seems to have slightly increased. Alright. Barusu, the Cathedral is directly to the right hand side after you leave the building]

[Subaru: O~k got it! So it's the chopstick-hand side, right? Although there doesn't seem to be a chopstick-culture in this world]

Since the dining culture here mainly consists of silverwares like knives and forks and spoons, Subaru's remark just now obviously made no sense to Ram. Anyways, thinking

about whether he should try shaving down some trees and start mass producing chopsticks here if he ever gets the chance,

[Subaru: Anyways, I'll head back to the Cathedral..... since it's still uncertain whether they can return to the village, just so we don't get their hopes up, maybe it'd be best if we don't mention that we're negotiating for their release yet?]

[Ram: Agreed. If we hold the talks tomorrow..... it would still be at least the day after tomorrow before they could leave. In the meantime, how to deal with Echidona's Tomb is what we need to think about]

[Subaru: ————]

Inadvertently, just as he was about to say some last words on his way out of the house, Subaru suddenly froze in place. The abrupt halt sent a surprised look onto Ram's face, but Subaru, who had turned around to look at her, seemed even more confused than she was. Then,

[Subaru:what did you say just now?]

He asked in a raspy voice. Hearing Subaru's question, Ram, still not any less surprised, tried to remember what she just said, and,

[Ram: The Tomb is what we need to think about?]

[Subaru: No, before that]

[Ram: Isn't Ram cute already?]

[Subaru: Went back too far!You said Echidona's Tomb, right?]

Feeling stupid after missing the right answer twice in a row, Subaru gave up and answered the question himself. Seeing Ram nodding reluctantly, Subaru pressed his hand

against his forehead. ——With terrifying speed, the memories flooded back into his consciousness.

“Echidona”

It was the name of the Witch of Greed, that white-haired girl in funerary dress, the self-proclaimed Incarnation of the Thirst for Knowledge, and the most important Bokukko-stereotype in this Parallel World. And above all,

[Subaru: What the hell were you trying to do..... messing with other people’s memories.....]

The entity who had done her work on Subaru’s memories so that no one else could learn of her secrets.

At the end of the tea party, before the impending Trials, she had forcibly extracted an oath from Subaru. But if that was the price he had to pay to receive the Qualifications, then he would willingly accept it.

[Subaru: Whether it was bugged or that was how it’s supposed to work..... either way, the restriction’s lifted!]

The restriction that Echidona was supposed to have placed on Subaru was lifted, and his memories were unbound.

Within his mind, the encounter with the Witches, the tea party, and his meeting with Echidona in school-uniform in his old classroom in the Original World, all of them, one by one, returned to him. And, having remembered, Subaru’s thoughts arrived on a possible a way to break open the deadlock on the Sanctuary. It would be akin to a forbidden move, but,

[Subaru: If the Cathedral’s on the chopstick-hand side, then the Tomb’s on the bowl-hand side——!]

[Ram: Barusu——?]

[Subaru: I better not keep you up too late! It won't be good to put too much strain on a guy who just recovered from a major illness!]

Waving up his hand in response to Ram's call from behind, Subaru charged out of the building and into the night. Not to the bed inside the Cathedral, but to the Tomb he had left only two hours ago.

Timewise, even if he went to the Tomb, there was very little chance that he'd be able to confirm his idea. But while the chance may be low, he couldn't resist trying it out. At least, if it couldn't be done on this night, he'd know.

[Subaru: After taking the first Trial, all sorts of annoying things just popped one after another. So invite me to another tea party, Witch..... no, Echidona!]

Flying down the streets of the Sanctuary, lit only by the dim natural lights of the night, Subaru ran on.

The icy wind, the muddy ground, the sweat on his brow, and his panting breaths—— all these sensations pressed his exhausted body onward. And, when he arrived,

[Garfiel: Yo..... thought you'd be comin']

Blocking Subaru's path was the youth with short blonde hair—— Garfiel, standing guard in front of the Tomb.

[Garfiel: Impressive, out runnin' so late at night. Born a man aft'r all, we're obliged t'make an effort n'get strong. "Th'Winbrook's the warrior's qualifications", yeah?]

Garfiel spread out his arms standing in middle of the night's path, gradually baring his fangs as he spoke, barring Subaru's way ahead. Seeing him do this, all the hairs on Subaru's skin stood on end.

[Subaru: Ohh, sorry but I really wasn't pretending to be jogging or anything like that. Too bad I can't stay and chat. It's not that I have a deadline, but, it doesn't hurt to do it early.....]

[Garfiel: Yer'not gettin' it, oy]

A sharp noise—— it was the cracking-sound of Garfiel's foot stomping into the ground faster than the eyes could see.

Soil flew up in all directions, and stamped into the hard surface of the path was a boot-shaped impression. Seeing Subaru's eyes widen, Garfiel clacked his teeth,

[Garfiel: If I see ya comin' back here again with this late night runnin' bullshit, can't guarantee what I'll do]

[Subaru: It's only been a short amount of time, but why does it already sound like we can't understand each other..... am I left out of the loop about something here?]

[Garfiel: Who knows. But you're blind to what's happenin' around ya, think least that's for sure]

Subaru said this, trying to relax the tension in the atmosphere, but it didn't seem to reach Garfiel, whose gleaming eyes continued to harbor the same hostility.

Garfiel, touching the white scar on his forehead,

[Garfiel: All that's ahead from here's the Tomb. You ain't gonna go all the way there t'take a piss, are ya?]

[Subaru: What, you wanna go together? Peeing on a Witch's grave or whatever, I actually never thought of this kind of revenge tactic before]

From what Subaru knows about Echidona, maybe she won't even be angry about it, and might even find it amusing. But anyways, without lowering his guard about Subaru, Garfiel seemed to want to continue the conversation,

[Garfiel: It couldn't be that yer tryin' to challenge another Trial on the same night y'passed the first one, could it? That'd be a bit greedy, ain't it?]

[Subaru: No way I'm considering something that crazy. I was just, planning another approach]

[Garfiel: Conniving, aren't ya]

[Subaru: Conniving?]

Tricks, forbidden hands, data-disk of inconceivable tactics or whatever you want to call it. Faced with absolute darkness, blind within that pitch-black world where he could only feel his way forward, he must clench tight onto any small hope of light, suck out its marrows, and swallow it to the last drop.

[Subaru: So get out of the way, Garfiel. I need to go into the Tomb. Perhaps there'll be a way to solve all of our problems.....]

[Garfiel: S'rry, but absolutely not. Yer absolutely. Not. Gettin' into this Tomb]

Against Subaru's determination, Garfiel had no intention of backing down.

Met with Garfiel's stubborn refusal, Subaru's confusion was giving way to anger.

Just why, why, of all people, must this man be the one standing in his way.

[Subaru: You probably feel the same way about me, don't you. That's why you're standing here in front of me like this. But even so.....]

[Garfiel: Didn't I tell ya not to give me that bullshit? Once I decided, I ain't gonna bend. You ain't gettin' through, for the Sanctuary or not]

[Subaru: Why do you hate me so much all of a sudden..... Just what the hell do you have against me!!]

Compared to the first day, and the last iteration, Garfiel's attitude could not have been more different. Faced with this unreasonable treatment, Subaru screamed, demanding Garfiel's true intentions.

Hearing that question, Garfiel scrunched up his nose, twisting his face into an expression not unlike a wild beast, and spoke.

[Garfiel: ——Yer stench]

[Subaru: ——Huh?]

Without meaning to, Subaru groaned stupidly.

In front of him, Garfiel covered his own nose with his palm,

[Garfiel: Ever since y'came outta the Tomb, the stench of the Witch's Miasma's just been fumin' out'a yer body. ——Y'expect me t'trust a guy stinkin' of the Witch rollin' with a Half-Witch!? The fuck y'take me for!?!]

Jolting up his arms, exposing his fangs, Garfiel laid bare his rage,

[Garfiel: THIS IS THE SANCTUARY! The Experimental Grounds of the Witch of Greed! The cesspool of half-wits who have no place to go, a fuckin' PILE OF IMPACTED SHIT!!]

Chapter 27 [Whisper]

——For Subaru, it was a sound of rage that invoked a strong sense of Deja-vu.

[Subaru: The Witch's... scent.....]

This would be the second time Subaru had been treated as an enemy because of it. Having picked up a scent that Subaru himself couldn't smell, the hatred within Garfiel's eyes seemed as if they were glaring at the very murderer of his parents.

Subaru already knew the sharpness of that gaze, and that same torrent of hostility. The Witch's stench. The Criminal's lingering scent. And a man ensnared by the Witch.

Those were the words she once lashed upon him right before she took his life, so far had their relationship deteriorated.

[Garfiel: What y'lookin' all stupid for? Got hit where it hurts and forgot how t'talk?]

In front of a shocked Subaru shaken into speechlessness, Garfiel had put his inexhaustible rage into words. Even after limply dropping his arms, Garfiel did not lower his guard.

Watching Subaru's every move, even the small sense of familiarity that was supposedly between them—— was already nowhere to be found.

[Subaru: Um, about the Witch's stench.....]

[Garfiel: Huh?]

[Subaru: The stench that's floating around my body, it was after I came out of the Tomb—— after the Trial, that it started floating around, right?]

[Garfiel:Yeah. Didn't even mind it before that, but soon as y'came back from the Trial it's suddenly reekin' up the place. I don't know what y'did inside, but I ain't a nice enough guy to trust a bastard smellin' like that]

Seeing Garfiel nodding in affirmation to his question, Subaru let out a short sigh and closed his eyes.

Then it's confirmed—— the Witch's stench clinging onto Subaru becomes stronger immediately after Return by Death.

He had suspected it before, but he had always subconsciously avoided this conclusion. Only now, did Subaru finally accept that piece of the answer.

——The one returning Natsuki Subaru from death, was the Witch.

He didn't know why. There shouldn't be any connection. But, incredibly, he could understand it, and accept it.

It was like the sensation of hesitating to place down the one final piece that would complete the puzzle, and then, finally doing so, seeing the complete picture at last.

[Subaru: Just what, do you have to do with me..... Until I came to this world, I hadn't even encountered a single paranormal phenomenon in my life. And after I got here I never even got a chance to meet the Witch-sama that everyone keeps talking about..... In fact, I died within six hours of being summoned here]

Subaru was given the special characteristic of "Return by Death" upon being invited to this world.

If that was connected to the Witch, then the summoning itself must have been connected to the Witch as well. Up to this point, he had never once asked why, but——

[Subaru: In the end, I can't ignore it anymore, huh.....]

[Garfiel: What're y'mutterin' about? I ain't got the time t'worry about this crap, so go straight back to sleepin' in the Cathedral. Don't come botherin' me with this bullshit again]

[Subaru:You're letting me go? Going by what you said, I'm a suspicious bastard with the Witch's stench floating all over me, right? It's the middle of the night, and there's just us here... sounds just like the perfect situation for either a late night tryst or quietly killing someone off, doesn't it?]

[Garfiel: Hah. I ain't a patient guy and it's not that I didn't think about it..... Right now chewin' yer head to shreds' easy, but then what? When the Half-Witch find out yer dead there'll be even more trouble, even I can see that much]

Seeing Subaru tilting his head, unable to understand his intentions, Garfiel continued [But],

[Garfiel: I wouldn't want you goin' near the Tomb and get yerself stinkin' even more. Right now only I got a sharp enough nose to notice it..... but who knows when the old hag and others'in this shithole'll start noticin' it too? And there're the even more troublin' guys]

[Subaru: Even more troubling.....]

[Garfiel: Y'have an idea or two who, don't ya? Y'didn't just start reekin'of that stench today. When they smell that stench, those assholes will wanna come]

Listening to Garfiel clacking his fangs saying this, Subaru held his breath as a flood of thoughts came racing through his mind.

Seeing that reaction, Garfiel snorted, and, with a wave of his arm as if swatting away an insect,

[Garfiel: So get outta here. I won't do anythin' this time. Tomorrow onwards, you stay nice and quiet and I won't have to do nothin' either. But don't let me find you comin' near the Tomb or gettin' involved with me or Granny. Won't be a nice experience for either of us'if that happens]

[Subaru: Mutual non-interference, huh. I don't bother you and you won't bother me. That's pretty generous]

[Garfiel: "Makin' it out alive after steppin' on Gringham's tale", yeah? Now get th'hell outta my sight before I change my mind. I rather not make Ram hate me if I can]

Uttering the name of the girl he liked, Garfiel announced this as though he was prepared to do the worst. The menacing hostility emanating from within him was only barely held in check by self restraint, that much was clear.

Though Subaru still wanted to argue, and continue this debate,

—It'd be best to retreat for now.

Coming to this conclusion, he exhaled and dropped his shoulders, and took a step back. Seeing Subaru no longer intent on going any further, Garfiel's own posture noticeably shifted as well. Closing one eye, and exhaling a deep breath from his nostrils, he sat himself down in the middle of the path to the Tomb. Crossing his arms, he looked up at Subaru,

[Garfiel: Good. Don't do anythin' unnecessary now. —I'll be here from today 'til the end of the Trials. Tomorrow, the day after, or the one a'fer that, day and noon and night, I got no intention of lettin' you in. I'll leave it at that, so remember it good]

[Subaru: If you don't want Ram to hate you, you might wanna go back for a bath from time to time]

[Garfiel: Before I start stinkin' as bad as you, you better do everythin' you can to get Emilia-sama to pass the Trials. —Now get outta my sight]

Garfel closed his eyes, and it seemed he was serious about spending the night here. At first glance, there appeared to be openings all over. If he withdrew from here, and circled around through another part of the forest, perhaps it's not impossible to sneak into the Tomb, but,

[Subaru: Better not...]

Garfiel's probably guarded against that as well.

As long as Subaru stayed within sight, Garfiel will only restrain him with words. But if Subaru did something to trample on this consideration, Garfiel will no longer be so lenient. Right now, Subaru would have no chance against an opponent who could throw

Patrasche along with the carriage, nor was there a way to get past his beast-like sense of smell.

[Subaru: This is the tea-party coming back to haunt me, isn't it.....]

Putting a hand against his forehead, he regretted the way he handled the good fortune of having a Witch in front of him to chat with. Although, he couldn't have asked her about any of this at the time, so he couldn't blame himself too much.

[Subaru: At least, there's nothing else I can do tonight. I must find some other way.....]

Without getting past Garfiel, there was no way to reach the Tomb. If Subaru cannot reach the Tomb, then there will be no other option except to have Emilia take the Trials.

As far as Subaru can tell, it would be impossible for her to pass the Trials in three days.

And if he cannot take any action within three days, then,

[Subaru: Elsa will attack the Mansion. And the chance to repel her will slip away]

Even if it meant seeking help from a Witch, Subaru had hoped to find some kind of sidepath by speaking to Echidona. But Garfiel had blocked that.

The alternative, of attempting to take the Trials without seeking Echidona's advice, was also blocked.

Coming to this point, Subaru realized that the situation had come to dead end.

[Subaru: Oy, oy, oy.....isn't this situation just plain bad?]

Lacking the strength to force his way through Garfiel, Subaru will need to be crafty as well as articulate in order to reach the Trials, or otherwise, he must find some other way to move Garfiel away from this place. But it would be impossible to do this alone.

[Subaru: And even if I try to recruit allies..... neither Ram or Otto are on my side on this one]

Considering its significance to the Royal Selection, those two had judged that it would be best to let Emilia take the Trials. Of course, if only they saw how much Emilia would be worn out over the next two days, perhaps their opinions would change, but,

[Subaru: Then we won't make it back in time for the attack. Isn't there something..... anything I can do?]

The time difference, between the time needed to make everyone see the difficulty of having Emilia pass the Trials and the timing of the imminent danger only Subaru knew about, was far too great. And if Subaru continued to insist on taking the Trials himself, it would only be interpreted as his lack of confidence in Emilia.

It gouged at his heart to think what Emilia might feel about this. It was not that he didn't believe in her. Rather, if time permitted it, Subaru believed beyond a doubt that she will accomplish the task that was given to her. Yet,

—Even knowing that her task is too heavy for her to bear, how can you still think so?

[Subaru: ————]

Deep down, a low, dark whisper made Subaru halt his steps.

Occasionally, he'd hear whispers like this. An obscure, dark part of himself mocking, laughing at him from behind for foolishly reaching for such hopes.

[Subaru: The Trials will keep eating away at her. And even so, for the sake of the expectations of those around her and to fulfill her own wish, she will carry on, no matter how much it hurts her. That's how it will be]

—Disregard her wounds and move forward until it is overcome, is that really what you want?

She will hold in her pain, her tears, and her sobs, and keep on walking, and in the end, the path will surely open, and her wish will come true. Was that what he believed?

—There are wounds that don't need to be opened, memories that don't need to be faced, and pasts that don't need to be atoned for.

[Subaru: She believes she had done something wrong, and that she must do something to make it right. That's why she is facing her past, and why she is suffering, isn't it.....]

—*But why must that time be now? Isn't this the worst possible timing?*

Is it truly necessary to face one's past?

Must all committed sins be atoned for? And is redemption something that can be forced?

The past she didn't want anyone else to know, if it wasn't for the Trials, Subaru would never have forced her to reveal it.

One day, with time, perhaps she will come to terms with it, and then there will be a chance to overcome that past.

But did it have to be now? Was this really the right time for that?

Would an answer she found through the obsessive notion that she must do something to atone truly carry a significance which she could be proud of?

[Subaru: At least, I think I'm glad I faced my past. I managed to pass, and even though I know it's just self-satisfaction, the way I am standing here now is an answer to that question]

—*But that's because you were already prepared to face your past, wasn't it?*

Even while he hated himself, there was a girl who loved him and accepted him.

It was because she was there, because of what she did for him, that Subaru was able to reveal that unsightly side of himself to his parents, peel open that ugliness inside him, and at last lift up his face to say his farewells.

—*Right now, is Emilia prepared for that?*

Having touched only a fragment of the weight of her past, just how much strength had Subaru's words and actions lent her up to now?

A shallow worldview, some insignificant efforts, and his empty proclamations of love. Just how much support could they have truly given her?

[Subaru:Just what... can I even do for you?]

He liked Emilia. He fell in love with her. He wanted to go on being in love with her, he thought.

He wanted her to like him. He wanted her to fall in love with him. And he wanted her to go on being in love with him, he thought, too.

That's why, he wanted to make her happy. To become her strength. And to take all the pain, and bitterness, and sorrow in her stead.

Even if he could not bear it, even if she would not let him, he wanted to be her support. —Like the girl who brought him back and made him stand, Subaru wanted to do for Emilia what Rem had done for him.

Like Rem, who loved him with the entirety of her being, in the same way, Subaru wanted to become Emilia's support.

Only this way, could Subaru truly fulfill the first promise he made to Rem. And so, right now, what Subaru must do was,

[Subaru: The time you need to stand, and the resolve to carry it through, all that I could do for you..... leave them to me, alright?]

Rolling his hand into a fist, Subaru straightened out exactly what he must do, and, letting out a small sigh, he edged up his lips into a smile.

Wait, what he was going to do hadn't changed at all.

[Subaru: I will do everything I can for her—— after all that headache it just comes down to those few words, huh. Well, you gotta have some self-awareness about what you're gonna do, right?]

For now, the question was how to solve the unavoidable problems at hand and overcome obstacles that accompanied them. And, after clearing them, concoct some shocking, ingenious plan to open this whole situation up.

Time waits for no one. And the limit was drawing near. But he couldn't afford to jump to the wrong conclusions now. He had already made that mistake too many times before.

[Subaru: Nothing will get better if I just turn my head down when things are bad. At least everything will only get worse as time goes by. I know that all too well, unfortunately]

Leaving it all to time and hoping it will solve itself was absolutely out of the question. For Subaru, this is the unforgiving way of the world, and it was for this very reason that all his struggling, writhing, and resisting had meaning.

[Subaru: The situation is at its worst. Time is running out. And there's still a mountain of things I don't understand, but]

That's nothing special, it is same for anyone, but even so, the fact that he had been granted the chance to do it all over again makes all the difference.

[Subaru: Don't doubt it for a second. Natsuki Subaru's courage will save you, Emilia——!]

One way or another, let's power through this with all we've got.

Chapter 28 [A Conversation Over Tea]

Feeling the first light of dawn burning onto his eyelids, Subaru sat himself up in the darkness.

It seemed he had fallen asleep while thinking. But since he sank into the sea of thought so late in the night, he had only managed two or three hours of sleep.

[Subaru: This would've been unthinkable back in the old world. Sunrises are supposed to be when I fall asleep, you know]

Saying this while giving his body a few turns, Subaru took a quick look around at the others who were beginning to wake in the Cathedral. When they noticed Subaru's gaze upon them, one by one they waved at him, and he did the same in return. Then, standing up, he headed for the Cathedral's door.

The crisp morning air greeted him as he went outside, where it seemed the residents of the Sanctuary and some of the refugees were working together to prepare breakfast.

[Woman: Aya, you're already up, Subaru-sama]

[Subaru: He-yo, good morning. Another fresh morning today?]

[Woman: Sure is. The wind's a bit chilly though..... looks like you managed to get a good night's sleep as well, Subaru-sama]

With a smile, the woman with a familiar face called out to him and touched a finger to her cheek. Seeing this, Subaru touched his cheek in the same spot and felt something sticky there—— and noticed there was a trail of saliva drooling down the side of his face.

[Subaru: Wah, no, embarrassing!]

Why was it that short periods of sleep make people wake up even sloppier, anyway? Like when you wake up looking abnormally messy after only a little nap, there must be some kind of rule to this.

Chuckling, and watching Subaru ponder about this unproductive question, another woman—— with short dog-ears on her head, offered him a wet towel. Subaru briefly thanked her, and quickly took the towel and wiped up his mouth.

“Off now?” he looked at them, and both women affirmed that it was. Subaru borrowed the towel so he could wash his face by the pond, and waved them good-day.

Watching the both of them as he left, within the interaction between them he didn’t see a single trace of unease or misunderstanding. There was only natural communication between members of two different races.

Over the past few days—— which, if you include the time rewound by Return by Death, would have been a week, there had been no noticeable conflicts between the refugees and the residents of the Sanctuary.

The refugees were in high spirits, and although he’d hate to admit it, the fact that their Lord Roswaal remained with them must have brought them a considerable sense of reassurance. In reality, the villagers’ faith in Subaru, who ate and slept with them, also played no small part in this. But Subaru, with his low evaluation of his own influence, didn’t take this into account.

Quite contrary to the ominous atmosphere of this place, the residents of the Sanctuary, beginning with the beast-eared woman just now, had grown more and more talkative. At the very least, Subaru felt that it was to the point where the divide between human and half-bloods no longer existed anywhere beyond their thoughts.

[Subaru: The only real thing dividing them was the Barrier, wasn’t it..... I don’t know what might’ve been going through the mind of whoever put up that thing, but that was a pretty asshole thing to do]

If Garfiel’s words could be believed, this place would be the Experimental Grounds of the Witch of Greed. In that case, the one who erected the Barrier to prevent the half-bloods from escaping might have been the Witch herself.

[Subaru: Echidona.....huh. At the end of the day, I still can't figure out what that Witch is up to]

White-haired and white-skinned, a monochrome girl wrapped in something of a funerary dress.

Lost her life 400 years ago, yet still bound to the present world, not unlike a ghost.

Contrary to her proclamation of not interfering with the real world, she had met with Subaru within the Trial grounds and offered her detailed commentary on his actions.

Then, she hid all the memories inside Subaru's mind relating to herself, only to allow it to be remembered again through some careless coincidence—— none of it made any sense.

Perhaps, there was some profound reason behind it, he thought.

[Subaru: Or if she just enjoys screwing with people to see what happens, then there's seriously nothing I can do. Come to think of it, what are you supposed to think of a lady who makes people she just met drink her bodily fluids for no reason, anyway.....]

Unpleasant memories of drinking Dona-Tea resurfaced in his mind. But since it was something that was supposed to have happened in the Spiritual world, he really wanted to believe that his actual body hadn't really absorbed any of the Dona bits.

Anyways, regardless of her intentions, the Sanctuary remained surrounded by the Barrier, and its inhabitants remained trapped within it.

[Subaru: When it comes down to it, the greatest obstacle at the moment is..... Garfiel, isn't it]

Whether it was to negotiate with Echidona directly or to personally challenge the Trials, the bottleneck was how to deal with Garfiel, whose hostility towards Subaru had jumped up.

If the change in his opinion of Subaru was truly due to the Witch's stench—— the side-effect of Return by Death, then improving Garfiel's attitude towards him could prove a near-impossible task.

Whether it was the Wolgarms, or the battle against the White Whale, Subaru had managed to turn the stench to his advantage and create breakthroughs in the situation, but,

[Subaru: I can make it smell stinkier, but I don't know how to make it go away..... Don't imagine deodorants would do anything to it. Actually, what am I saying. Stinky or not stinky, what am I, garbage?]

At least, there was a way to intentionally intensify his stench by telling someone about Return by Death. And judging from everything that had happened so far, the intensified odor doesn't seem to last forever.

It seems, just like any ordinary smell, it will gradually fade over time. But on the other hand, it would also mean that there was no other method to make it go away.

[Subaru: I definitely can't count on Garfiel's attitude softening. And though I'd rather not think about it..... if I mess up and Return by Death again.....]

If he dies again, and starts over inside the Tomb, the lingering scent clinging onto Subaru now will be compounded over again with the stench of the Witch. If that happens, it would be terrifying to imagine what Garfiel's reaction will be.

Facing the worst possible case of losing his life, by starting over, Subaru could alter the result.

And salvage everything—— yet, in spite of Subaru's greed, the fact is, he hadn't managed to fulfill everything. And there were still things he could not bring back.

But even so, given the opportunity to do it all over again, Subaru intends to use it to choose a better future than the world that came before. It's difficult to appreciate a thing like Return by Death, but without that ability, he would have had to continue on through one of those countless abysmal futures.

Yet,

[Subaru: Even if I can repeat it indefinitely..... with every return my relationships will worsen. The difficulty will increase along with the number of times I respawn..... that's a first, alright]

At this point, it was still possible to establish rational communication with Garfiel. But next time, when the stench is compounded over again, he couldn't be certain whether he will still be granted an opportunity to speak.

At least, recalling the memory of Rem stealing away his life with her morning star when she could no longer trust him as a result of the stench still left him a lonely sense of emptiness on the left side of his body.

Remembering those he left in the Mansion—— especially remembering the sleeping Rem, the next thought that came into Subaru's mind was the assassin in black. The reappearance of that happy murderer with her lethal blade, who currently tops the high-score chart of this world for the Subaru-Kill-Count.

Incidentally, also sharing first place was the gray cat-shaped spirit, while the whole flock of people sharing second-place with the kill-count of one was just too many to keep track of.

[Subaru: Now that I think about it, it's kinda like an inverted kill-counter. Or I guess a "getting-killed-counter" would be more appropriate here?Anyways, I need to find a countermeasure against Elsa. If it comes down to a brawl there's no way I can win, so the only practical fighting strength we have would be a pick between Roswaal or Garfiel]

Roswaal, even with his magical abilities, was still hindered by his injuries. So in the end, the best solution would still be to convert Garfiel into an ally.

And in order to have Garfiel fight off Elsa when she attacks the Mansion, Subaru must break the Barrier surrounding the Sanctuary. And so, the most important steps would be,

[Subaru: Pass through the Trials and liberate the Sanctuary before the attack on the Mansion, reconcile with Garfiel and bring him to the Mansion to repel Elsa to get to the HAPPY END..... or something like that?]

Saying it over to himself, Subaru saw the mutually-contradictory problem and furrowed his brows.

In order to make peace with Garfiel, he must liberate the Sanctuary.

And in order to liberate the Sanctuary, he must get past Garfiel so he could challenge the Trials.

Neither of these conflicting points can be satisfied without the other.

Perhaps there was still the possibility of resolving this through words, but looking back on their conversations last night and his experience of their interactions up to now, the slimness of that possibility made him want to clutch at his head.

For better or for worse, interactions with Garfiel are straight-forward, but it also means that once he's set his mind on something, it would be very difficult to change it again.

Therefore, if there was any chance left for Subaru, it would be,

[Subaru: Aim for an opportunity to sneak into the Tomb and get in touch with Echidona, or sneak into the Tomb at the time to challenge the Trials, and break through the remainder of the Trials]

Finishing up washing his face at the pond, Subaru arrived at this conclusion, and turned his steps towards a direction quite different from the cooking grounds.

Wiping his face with the squeezed-dry towel, he set his destination toward a sparsely populated end of the Sanctuary. Heading there, passing a small hill, and continuing down a single road——

[Subaru:right, I was expecting too much with my opportunism, wasn't I]

In the middle of the clearly visible path leading straight to the Tomb, seated in the same posture as the previous night, Garfiel was waiting.

——Head to the Tomb first thing in the morning and sneak past Garfiel when he isn't looking.

He thought he'd pull a free one first thing in the morning, but looks like that's been instantly foiled.

[Subaru: You look energetic this morning]

[Garfiel: I should be th'one sayin' that. The hell are ya doin' showin' up here first thing in the mornin? Y'tryin' to piss me off? Oy!]

Subaru raised his hand a little to say hi, and Garfiel, looking annoyed, opened one of his eyes and spat this back. Seeing that expected reaction, Subaru dropped down his hand again, and turned to the petite figure—— Lewes, standing beside the cross-legged Garfiel.

[Subaru: I figured Garfiel would be here, but I didn't expect to find Lewes-san here as well. Good morning]

[Lewes: Mnn, it is a nice morning. Is Su-bo out for a stroll too?]

[Subaru: I guess you can call it that, but it's not as pleasant as it sounds. I came here full of hopes, you know, but also to annoy Garfiel]

[Garfiel: You.....]

Seeing blue veins pop up on Garfiel's forehead, and Subaru just pretending not to notice his reaction, Lewes tilted her head. Then,

[Subaru: You said "too" just now, does that mean Lewes-san's out for a stroll too?]

[Lewes: The stroll's just an added bonus for me. Last night I heard Gar-bo hadn't come home and was just going to sit out here on the ground..... So I wanted to see how he's doing]

Lewes said this while playing with her long, pink wavy hair with a finger. In her other hand, she was holding a little package, which, judging from its size and shape, must be packing some simple food inside. Most likely, that was the stubborn not-gonna-move Garfel's breakfast.

Suddenly, Subaru touched a hand to his chin and looked at the two in turn,

[Subaru: Then, Garfiel and Lewes-san, have you guys known each other for a long time?]

[Lewes: Ever since Gar-bo was little, at least..... Well, he's still little]

[Garfiel: Oy, Granny. I've already way overtaken your height here]

[Lewes: And you still haven't grown any taller like you're supposed to. Anyways, we've been together since he was a lot smaller than he is now. I've even found myself growing used to these exchanges]

Even with Garfiel's protests, Lewes seemed to accept them without paying them much mind. Underneath what seemed to be a little girl was indeed an old woman inside. A total Loli-Granny in every sense of the word.

However, having noticed something from what she said just now, Subaru raised up his brows,

[Subaru: From the way you said that..... was Garfiel not born inside the Sanctuary?]

[Garfiel:Don't go pryin' where y'don't need to. Y'wanna be like "Sneak attackin' the black Botokku only t'get killed instead"?]

[Subaru: Yeah that didn't really communicate at all so there's not much stopping power there. So, Lewes-san, tell me the answer, if you please!]

Seeing Subaru intent on completely ignoring last night's warning, Garfiel ground his teeth so hard that they were almost starting to make a noise. But Subaru ignored that too and kept trying to get to the bottom of it.

Looking back and forth at what was going on between the two men, Lewes spilled out a tired sigh, and,

[Lewes: It was ten and something years ago when Gar-bo came to the Sanctuary. Back then, Gar-bo was still a lil'baby that couldn't even walk yet. Ros-bo brought him along and.....]

[Garfiel: ——Granny, don't say anythin' unnecessary beyond that]

Narrowing his eyes, Garfiel pressed down his voice as he said this.

Hearing this sent a chill into Subaru's chest, and for a moment, he was afraid that he may have carelessly stepped on something he shouldn't have. But,

[Lewes: Who're you talking to with that kind of mouth, you dumbass!]

[Garfiel: Hurts!]

Striding forward impressively, Lewes reached out her hand and smacked the golden spiky-haired Garfiel right in the head. Under the little girl's arms that didn't seem all that strong, Garfiel hugged his head as if thunderbolts were dropping down on him, and, looking up at her like this,

[Garfiel: G-Granny what're y'doin' all of'a sudden.....]

[Lewes: I should be asking you, after raising you up myself is that how you're gonna speak to me? Just, shameful, embarrassing, so sad it makes me wanna cry. Take this! This! This!]

[Garfiel: Sto-, hurts, aow, watchin', there's someone watchin'!]

With "pok pok pok" sound effects, Lewes kept swinging her arm while Garfiel, looking like he wanted to crawl into a hole, tried to block her blows with his hand.

While watching those two going at it, Subaru almost couldn't stop himself from laughing,

[Subaru: I think I've got a pretty good estimate of how long and deep your relationship is now..... Garfiel, do you really plan to keep sitting here?]

[Garfiel: Unless there's somethin' else I need to do, I'm here t'stay. I wouldn't want someone sneakin' in while I'm away, now do I?]

Guarding against anyone sneaking in, even with Subaru trying to get him to let his guard down, Garfiel would not budge. Since Subaru wasn't expecting too much, he wasn't

entirely discouraged. Rather, the fact that Garfiel had overturned his own words from only half a day ago meant there was probably a need for Subaru to revise his understanding of Garfiel.

But in any case, the fact that his stubbornness remained difficult to move hadn't changed. [Subaru: Come to think of it, doesn't the Trial only take place at night? There's no point for me to sneak in during the day anyway. Isn't it kinda pointless to keep sitting here like this?]

[Garfiel: Yer wastin' yer breath if y'think I'm gonna move. Wanna sneak in durin' the day and wait for th'night, bankin' on me not bein' able to go in and then yer all set, yeah? Y'think I ain't ready for a long fight? What, y'underestimin' me?]

[Subaru: Tch, I've been found out?]

Subaru held up both hands over his head to surrender, and, seeing him do this, Garfiel snorted, before looking up at Lewes,

[Garfiel: So, I can't be movin' from here for a while. Granny, food]

[Lewes: Is that the kind of attitude you take toward someone who went to all the trouble of bringing you food? Lamentable. Here]

Despite her complaints, Lewes handed him the parcel. And, taking it, Garfiel unwrapped the parcel and started filling himself up with the dumpling-like contents inside.

With Lewes helping him like this, it would seem the battle of wills could be a long one.

[Subaru: Looks like it'll be hard to do anything for the moment.....huh. Oh well, I'll come back next time]

[Garfiel: Y'don't have to come back y'know. I ain't lettin' ya through anyway. Y'might as well go sit quietly in a corner somewhere, yeah?]

Having finished eating, Garfiel licked his fingers and called out to Subaru, who was turning to leave. Subaru waved him goodbye without turning around, and Lewes followed along beside him.

[Lewes: Now that I'm done feedin' Gar-bo, I want to talk to Su-bo for a bit]

[Subaru: What a coincidence. I have something I want to ask Lewes-san too. Though I really want to go see Emilia-tan's face first, but.....]

Looking up at the sky, he found that the Sun had only just risen.

He could still remember that on the first day after the beginning of the Trials, the exhausted Emilia will wake up around noon. He would have liked to follow his desires and go to see her face while she slept, but he should probably move forward with the other activities here instead.

Subaru cast a glance towards Lewes, observing the elderly little girl with pink wavy hair who was walking along beside him.

Her face seemed a little sleepy, and with wobbling little steps, she managed to keep up with his pace. Even knowing full well that she's a Loli-Granny, there was still something that tickled the insides of his heart.

[Subaru: Want me to give you a piggyback ride?]

[Lewes:And here I was wondering why you were suddenly looking at me like that. Su-bo, you don't happen to be attracted to little girls, do you? That'd be even more hopeless than Ros-bo]

[Subaru: Please don't mistake me for a Loli-con! When I buy GALGAMES I'd use all my OPTION-POINTS to conquer Senpai or Older-Sister type characters! And even right now, I'm desperately working my ass off for an older sister type, you know..... although I just recently found out she's quite a lot older than me BUT MY HEART HAS NOT CHANGED! That's the kinda guy I am, you know?]

[Lewes: What kind of guy is that..... I almost wanted to ask, but nevermind. No, I don't need a piggyback. If I don't walk around a bit my old legs and hips will go weak]

[Subaru: Another incredible statement demonstrating the appearance-gap!]

Once again, it seriously hit him that underneath the appearance of a little girl was really an elderly lady. There was also the possibility that while her skin was young, all her organs inside were creaking. Being a Loli-Granny must be surprisingly tough.

[Lewes: What is that, you look like you're thinking of something stupid again]

[Subaru: Eh?? No way, really? I was totally making a poker face just now and being careful not to reveal my inner thoughts, you know]

[Lewes: Your face looks just like Gar-bo's when he's chompin' on stolen pastries. No matter which child it is, children are always up to the same things]

[Subaru: This granny just keeps dishing out her old granny antics one after another, huh]

Setting the endless reminders of Lewes' age aside, Subaru, walking alongside her, suddenly began looking around him, [Huh?]

[Subaru: It's good that..... we got a chance to talk, but, where are we going? Actually, it's pretty late for me to ask this now, but after you lent your bed to Emilia-tan, where has Lewes-san been sleeping? In the wild?]

[Lewes: So I just lent out my home and you're immediately treating me like I'm homeless..... The fact that you'd say that tells me you might've forgotten that I am still the head of this place. I still know a few people who'd let me stay over for a few days]

[Subaru: Yeah, that's right. It's only been a few days, but the people here are all unexpectedly nice people]

Recalling the scene at the cooking grounds, and the various occasions when he got to interact with the Sanctuary's residents, Subaru furrowed his brows, and couldn't help but wonder if the brewing conflict Garfiel had warned about hadn't just been an exaggeration. Stealing a glance at Subaru, who had grown silent, Lewes nodded, [Hm], [Lewes: Something doesn't sit well with you?]

[Subaru: No, not if you say it like that..... How should I say this, it's a bit different from what I imagined. Judging from the way Emilia was treated at the Capital, half-bloods couldn't have been treated much better. So I thought maybe the half-bloods would be harboring some complicated feelings toward the pure-bloods]

At least, despite being trapped in a Sanctuary referred to as the Experimental Grounds, the faces of the residents didn't seem to be showing particularly dark emotions. Of course, there must be those who didn't find this amusing, but Subaru hadn't caught any glimpse of such negative feelings here so far.

If Garfiel, who didn't mince words nor emotions, was any indication, his personal emotions seemed closer to indignation than anger. An anger on behalf of others, rather than himself.

Despite their unpleasant surroundings, the morale of the residents was exceedingly high. More than incredible, it was almost to the point of being inconceivable.

In front of Subaru's doubts, Lewes' eyes widened in surprise,

[Lewes: What, Su-bo, you may not look like it, but you have more ideas than you let on]

[Subaru: I don't look like it... that part's pretty unnecessary, isn't it..... I mean, I'm confident that I look more intellectual than Garfiel, at least. But, well, I guess I'm pretty thoughtless when it comes to all sort of things]

[Lewes: It's quite a virtue to be aware of your own shortcomings. You can only begin to improve once you've realized where you are deficient..... Ah, we're here]

Coming to a split in the path, Lewes led the way for the lost-looking Subaru. Instead of heading in the direction of the Cathedral and Roswaal's residence, they turned towards the other end of the village outskirts, opposite from the Tomb—— and there, they arrived at Lewes' isolated temporary lodging.

Unlike the sparsely placed houses scattered over the outskirts, for some reason, this house stood alone, far apart from all the others. A word naturally came to Subaru's mind, [Subaru: It's too lonely, isn't it. Why are you staying in a place like this?]

[Lewes: It can't be helped. Right now, this is the only building inside the Sanctuary with no one living in it. It may be far away from the center of the village, but it's spacious, and I quite like it here]

[Subaru: Didn't you say you know people who'd let you stay over? Why did you choose to live alone? Even though I know quite a few Loli-Grannies in my life it's still way too sad for me to see a Loli-Granny die alone]

[Lewes: I honestly can't tell if you're concerned for me or if I'm being made fun of. Here, come in. I'll brew you some tea. Though Ram certainly brews it better]

[Subaru: No matter what kind of leaves you put in it there, it'll still just taste like leaves, so no worries]

[Lewes: You should be more careful about the kinds of things you say]

With a sigh, Lewes invited Subaru into the house through the opened door. It was a large building, about half the size of Roswaal's temporary residence. In fact, divided into three rooms, it seemed perhaps too large for just one person to live in.

Finding a chair to sit down in and looking all around the room, he saw that the interior of the small room was simple and well maintained. Lewes had said that no one else lived here, but,

[Subaru: For a house that's not been lived in, it sure feels like someone often comes here. Even for me, being a top-notch bed-maker myself, I'd have to grant the fluffiness of that bed a passing grade..... there's no way Lewes-san did that]

[Lewes: What's with that face you're making as if I enjoy being alone so I come here whenever something happens and just kill time here and wait for things to cool off?]

[Subaru: That must be an awfully specific facial expression I got!]

Still, there was something sad about the possibility that the reason she came up with this rapid-fire explanation was that it was something she had thought about before. He was joking just now when he mentioned dying alone, but it can't be denied that something about her matched his impression of a solitary old lady.

Silently turning away and occupying herself with brewing tea, her back seemed almost lonely. Seeing this, Subaru looked around trying to find some way to change the topic. The room was clean and neatly organized. There was a slightly dulled mirror above a dresser. A flower vase without flowers, and two metal shields hanging on the wall.
——Shields?

[Subaru: Why are there shields here? And two of them?]

[Lewes: They're Gar-bo's. That kid's using this place like it's a storage house]

[Subaru: So he hangs around here too, huh. It does kinda look like a good hangout spot for delinquents now that I think about it..... But, he couldn't be the one carefully tidying up this place, could he?]

That'd be way too out-of-character, Subaru murmured under his breath as he looked at Garfiel's shields.

He often saw crossed swords adorning the walls of noblemen's houses in Mangas, and these shields were slightly tilted in a fashion similar to that as well. But, unlike something

that ought to be used as ornaments, these shields were riddled with scratches and dents, and were certainly not mere antiques that have not seen a day of battle.

[Subaru: Then again, what kind of battle can you fight with just shields?]

[Lewes: Back in the day, they would always fight bouts with these shields in the fields outside this house. Each one would hold a shield, and round and round they'd go, bumping into each other]

[Subaru: That sounds a bit dangerous for just playing around..... Mind if I ask who it was that Garfiel played with?]

Over the time he spent in the Sanctuary, he hadn't met anyone who could have been so intimate with Garfiel. Of course, being an important person in these lands, it was apparent that Garfiel had good relations with the residents at the cooking grounds. But, other than that, did he have anyone he was truly close with? Subaru couldn't think of any particular names.

If he had to name someone, it would have been Lewes. But just picturing Lewes holding a shield and charging against Garfiel felt incredibly dangerous.

For a while, Lewes stayed silent in front of Subaru's question. She brought over two cups of steaming tea set on a tray, and handed Subaru one of them as she sat down on the bed. Receiving it, Subaru took a sip while it was still hot, and moistened his throat.

[Subaru: Right, tastes just like leaves]

[Lewes: Tea's just wasted on you, huh. Well, I already anticipated that so I used the cheaper leaves.Even tea leaves are considered precious here, you know]

About once a month, Roswaal would send over precious items and luxury goods here. Subaru, adapting to the situation, did his best to pretend to appreciate the tea, as they sat wordlessly tilting their cups for a while.

Then, after some time had passed in silence,

[Subaru: ——Frederica]

Hearing Subaru's abrupt whisper, Lewes' shoulder jumped a little.

Lifting her gaze from her teacup, she looked at Subaru. And, seeing something wavering in her expression, Subaru asked again,

[Subaru: The name of the person bumping shields with Garfiel, is Frederica, isn't it?]

[Lewes:did you hear that from Gar-bo?]

[Subaru: Nah. I pieced it together from some fragmented conversations and got a feeling about it somehow. At least, I just knew that there must've been something complicated between Garfiel and Frederica]

At Roswaal's Mansion, Frederica had warned him to beware of a man named Garfiel. And when Garfiel heard Frederica's name, his expression changed, and he wanted to know how she was. It would be hard not to suspect that there was something between them.

And, most of all,

[Subaru: Their fangs are way too similar. If they're still unrelated, even Buddha wouldn't allow that]

[Lewes:Ahh, quite so. Even I can't think of a way to deny that]

Faced with this decisive fact, Lewes let out a sigh as if giving up.

In terms of similarities between Garfiel and Frederica, just their vicious fang-filled smiles alone would have been enough. At least, it would be enough to tell that they were not in a romantic relationship or anything like that.

If he had to guess, then their relationship must be——

[Subaru: Brother and sister..... Actually, more like older sister and younger brother. If I were to guess who's older, Frederica seems more like the older sister type]

[Lewes: Goodness..... I'm impressed that you'd be able to tell all that just from intuition]

Hearing Subaru point this out, Lewes could only show her amazement.

Then, nodding her head thoughtfully, and placing the remainder of her tea back on the tray, she corrected her posture, and,

[Lewes: Just as Su-bo imagined, the owner of these two shields are the siblings Frederica and Garfiel. Frederica Baumann, who had left the Sanctuary, and Garfiel Tinsel, are family bound by blood]

Confirming Subaru's speculation, Lewes nonetheless spilled a melancholic sigh.

[Lewes: ——And now, owing to their mutual misunderstandings, they have each wound up on diverging paths]



Chapter 29 [An Omnivorous Man]

Closing in on the core of what he wanted to know, Subaru tilted his teacup.

Letting the hot tea pass down his throat, he swallowed it along with his doubts for now and settled them into his stomach. Then, seriously considering what he should say next,
[Subaru: To what extent... are you willing to answer my questions?]

[Lewes:you may have already noticed my reluctance, but don't expect too much from me. Because of my contract, there is not much information I can give Su-bo. As for the Trials, I am under strict orders not to allow any outside interference with the Tomb]

[Subaru: The way you said that already gave me a few clues..... strict orders, huh]

[Lewes: ————]

Faced with Subaru's repeated questions, Lewes grew silent.

Judging by her words and behaviors so far, there weren't many contenders for someone capable of bending her to their will. More than likely, those were Roswaal's orders, but,

[Subaru: In that case, that guy's objectives just becomes less and less comprehensible. Does he want me..... want us to pass the Trials? Or doesn't he? I can't even be sure whether he's planning to help us or not]

[Lewes: I guess he was hoping you would find the answer to that yourselves, or something along those lines. Even back in the day, Ros-bo was a naughty little child who loved to do things in these obscure and roundabout ways. He may have gotten taller, but deep down, he hasn't changed a bit]

Perhaps it was because they've known each other for so long, that Lewes could lightheartedly say this of the young Roswaal.

"Hasn't changed a bit." Having only gotten to know Roswaal's perverted side, Subaru

couldn't help but shudder at the thought of what Roswaal might've been like back when his limbs were still stubby.

[Subaru: Well, there must still be some cuteness left in there, mnnyeah, probably maybe]

[Lewes: Ros-bo's childhood..... hm, since they pertain to the secrets of the Mathers family, I'm afraid I cannot divulge anything further]

[Subaru: Uuuogh, but I'm interested..... no, wait, am I interested? I don't really mind not knowing too much about that guy's personality, actually]

Crossing his arms and tilting his head, Subaru started to question why he wanted to know in the first place, and,

[Subaru: Alright, let's toss that one out. I just need to know what that guy's planning, there's no need to understand him]

[Lewes: You sure came to that conclusion easily]

[Subaru: There's no need to worry about things that're pointless to worry about. Ultimately, humans can't understand everything from zero to a hundred anyway. But even so, we still want to understand some things, and I guess that's what love is. I'll always love Emilia-tan, but I don't love Roswaal all that much!]

In front of that clear-cut declaration tossing Roswaal aside, Lewes gave an impressed nod, and continuing [In that case], she touched her hand to her chin,

[Lewes: It seems, there is no other topic I can talk to you about.....]

[Subaru: Naah, as long as we don't touch on anything forbidden by Lewes-san's contracts, my QUESTION-TIME is still ongoing, isn't it? Nevermind Roswaal's personality for now, but I still want to ask a few more things from the Sanctuary's all-knowledgeable granny Lewes-san]

[Lewes: H...mm. Well, if you just wanna ask, that's fine, go ahead and ask. But, the dire consequences of violating my contract are not limited to myself alone. By no means forget this, understood?]

Bending forward, the little girl glared up threateningly at Subaru.

Honestly, it looked so adorable that it gave off no sense of pressure at all, but Subaru nonetheless hugged his own shoulders pretending to shudder in reaction, and whimpered out [So scary] with tears puddling up in his eyes,

[Subaru: Alright, now that we have the scary aggressor and the frightened victim properly mapped out, it's question-time now?]

[Lewes: I'm finding it a bit hard to accept the way you made me the villain just now]

[Subaru: As a man once said, that's that and this is this. So, question now—— You said that Frederica and Garfiel are siblings, and Frederica had stayed inside the Sanctuary, right?]

While Lewes was still a bit unable to accept her treatment, with a feigned smile, Subaru cut directly into the main topic. Seeing her expression change upon hearing his question, Subaru waved a finger,

[Subaru: Frederica, who was supposed to be in the Sanctuary, is now dressed in a maid's uniform and serving in Roswaal's Mansion. But, from what I've gathered, this situation sounds a bit odd]

[Lewes: Hmm, odd how?]

[Subaru: If Frederica is Garfiel's sister, then she must be half-blooded as well. Then, being a half-blood, she shouldn't have been able to leave the Sanctuary for as long as the Barrier is still intact]

The Barrier of the Sanctuary that reacts to the blood of the half-bloods, barring their escape:

It was the thing that struck Emilia unconscious on the way in, that kept Garfiel and Lewes trapped in this place indefinitely, and it was the wall that was currently one of the greatest obstacles standing in Subaru's path.

After agonizingly trying to find a way to surmount it, there was now an exception who had passed beyond that wall. In other words,

[Subaru: There must be some kind of secret path to leave the Barrier. Or maybe, even the Barrier's existence is a lie]

[Lewes: A lie..... that would be a bit upsetting. The truth is, in my life up to now, I have never once set foot into the outside world. All this is owing to the existence of the Barrier]

[Subaru: Or, maybe you are being deceived by the contract you've been bound to..... such a malicious possibility isn't entirely out of the question? It could also be that since there's too much risk involved in actually testing the reality of the Barrier, it just so happens that no one thought to verify it. But then...]

The possibility that all the residents of the Sanctuary had been deceived about the existence of the Barrier.

The Trials inside the Tomb certainly exist, so this should be highly unlikely. Yet Subaru couldn't completely rule out the possibility that this was some overly elaborate plan to trap the refugees of Arlam and win Emilia renown.

[Subaru: Considering the kind of uproar there'd be if they found out about the truth, it's just a bit too unrealistic. So the second possibility should be automatically ruled out..... which only leaves us with the first one]

[Lewes: A secret path..... is it. But, what will you do once you have found out the answer?]

[Subaru: If there is a secret path that anyone could use, then we can just move everyone in the Sanctuary outside the Barrier, and there'll be no need to take the Trials]

Hearing Subaru's outrageous proposal, Lewes dropped her jaw. Seeing her like this, Subaru waved his hands from side to side, [Right?]

[Subaru: Sure there are benefits to taking the Trials as well. Honestly, having benefitted quite a bit from it myself, I won't deny that. But, the Trials—— or in this case, the past... it'd be ok to put it off for now, right? There are times when people shouldn't be forced to face their pasts, don't you think?]

[Lewes: You are talking about Emilia-sama? But hardships will not choose the right time to pay their visit. Running away now in the face of calamities would only be.....]

[Subaru: I don't mean running away forever. Just retreating in order to better prepare for the fight. That's what they call a tactical retreat. There are times when we have to fight on unfavorable ground, but moving to more favorable grounds when possible is a good thing for both the person herself and those around her, isn't it?]

Cutting off Lewes just as she tried to say something, Subaru continued stacking on justifications for running away, insisting that it isn't always shameful to turn one's back.

[Subaru: Even if she doesn't face it now, one day Emilia will face it, no matter what. It may be ironic, but that Trial made her remember. So she must now choose to either forget or to accept it. And all I can do is to somehow make it less painful for her when she decides]

[Lewes:You speak of distancing her from suffering, yet you would not let her run away from the single most painful part]

[Subaru: Whether to run away from that part is her choice as well. But I believe that she..... Emilia will not do such a thing]

[Lewes: And what makes you trust her so? At least, it's impossible for me. To see the way she came out of the Tomb, and still have such expectations of her]

[Subaru: Well, that's because I love Emilia-tan to death, you know]

As Lewes continued to deny Emilia, Subaru casually said this as if it were nothing.

And though Lewes had already found herself speechless several times throughout this conversation, these last words left her the most awestruck up to this point.

Watching Lewes' astonished face, Subaru smiled awkwardly, and scratched at his neck.

[Subaru: I love Emilia, and I think she's super cute. So, I believe that this super-cute girl I fell for is the kind of girl who will overcome anything, no matter how hard or painful it may be. I expect and expect and expect this of her, and I believe that she will meet my expectations]

[Lewes: Th..... that isn't an answer at all. No matter how much you like someone, there is nothing you can do about what is inside the other person's heart. Su-bo, surely you know this.....]

[Subaru: I do understand. Emilia is a girl. Not all parts of her are strong, and there are super small parts of her that are weak, and there might even be a chance that there's a super super impossibly small ugly part in there as well]

[Lewes: Are you admitting there is or not.....]

[Subaru: If I believe... that in spite of all her weak parts, it will be her strong parts that will shine through in the end... then that's what devotion is, isn't it?]

Inscribed into Subaru's heart, was the belief that devotion was the strongest expression of love. And he had tasted the happiness of being on the receiving end of someone devoting her entire being to him as well. Therefore,

[Subaru: I will do anything for Emilia. I believe she will overcome her weak parts and find the strength to lift up her head, and I will work hard for that future where I get to rub it in everyone's faces that I was right to believe in her]

[Lewes:But even so, she is the one who will be facing the most painful part of her heart, alone]

[Subaru: But that's obvious, isn't it? I can't be at Emilia's side when she faces her past. If I existed in her past, I'd take her hand while she's sitting on the ground crying and pull her back up, and do everything I can to cheer her up. But I'm not there. What happened in her past had nothing to do with me. As much as I want to reach out my hand, it's like someone watching a drama having no way to interfere with what's happening on TV]

That was the truth. The past was the past, and no one could touch it.

Even the past that Subaru had faced and overcome, was only a fiction. He hadn't conveyed a single thing to his real parents, and all he had gained was some sense of self-satisfaction.

But,

[Subaru: Compared to getting no bonus at all, it's definitely better to get at least a little bonus. I can't help her face her past while I'm stuck in the real world. But, her present-self can lend her own insufficient past-self a hand, couldn't it? Lending yourself a hand isn't against the rules, is it?]

[Lewes: ————]

[Subaru: Even if I can't help her directly, I'll use my words and actions and affection and..... well I'd be really happy if I could have the highest place in Emilia's heart, but she's received all sorts of things from other people as well. At least, she has more now than the Emilia of the past. The more weapons she has at her disposal, the more she will be able to help her imperfect past. That's how we can beat this Trial. The Trial's difficulty was set based upon this premise, wasn't it]

Having experienced this first-hand, Subaru could say this again no matter how many times he was asked.

[Subaru: I will help Emilia. I will do everything in my power to help her present-self overcome her past. And in order to achieve that goal, even if it means taking side paths or throwing caution out the window or cheating or paying real money for in-game credits, I will do it. That's how I intend to help her]

[Lewes: Really..... that sure is a self-centered way to love someone]

[Subaru: I'm no herbivore or carnivore, you can just call me an omnivorous guy——!]

Snapping his fingers and sparkling his teeth with a wink, Subaru stuck up his thumb and struck out a pose.

Watching Subaru abruptly ending his speech like this, Lewes exhaled a long, long sigh as if giving up altogether.

[Lewes: That sure was a lot of pretty words for making an excuse for doing something sneaky]

[Subaru: Heheh]

[Lewes: Gobbledygook.I'm sorry, but I cannot tell you the details of the side path. However, I can tell you that it's impossible to rely on it alone. The way Frederica left the Sanctuary was an exception. The others cannot do the same]

Lewes shook her head and turned down Subaru's hopes. Subaru's heart dropping at her words, his shoulders slumping and his knees falling to the floor—— didn't really happen. Instead,

[Subaru: Oh. Can't do it huh. I was thinking it'd be a great deal if that could work, but I guess it's ok. Then, onto the next question.....]

[Lewes: This might be a bit funny coming from me, but, you sure don't like to give up, Su-bo]

[Subaru: If I gave up that easily, who knows how many times I would've had to sit in the Whale's stomach by now. It's a bit funny for me to say this too, but never giving up and the DEPTH OF MY LOVE are pretty much the only weapons I have, you know]

Subaru came out and announced his uselessness, and once again, Lewes only stood there stumped just as she had been many times already in the past hour. Subaru had to clap his hands with [Snap out'of it],

[Subaru: Even though I have all sorts of problems with this, I still realize that having Emilia reveal her true powers and smash right through the Trials would be the most epic-heroic way to do it. So, does the VETERAN-TRIALS-CHALLENGER-Lewes-san have some insider advice?]

[Lewes: Why do I get the feeling I've just been called something I'd rather not be called... And even if you ask me, I could only tell you that I don't know. I've never taken the Trials, after all, so I couldn't possibly know the answer to that]

[Subaru: Wuh?]

Tilting his head, Subaru let out a stupid groan in front of Lewes' reply. But surely, just now, he had heard something he couldn't let slide. After all,

[Subaru: Just now, might you perhaps have just enlightened me with the revelation that you have never taken the Trials?]

[Lewes: What's with that polite-speak all of a sudden. It's obvious, isn't it? I am not allowed to challenge the Trials meant for those from outside the Sanctuary. It's the same for the others too. At least, in the seventy years I have spent here, I have no knowledge of anyone attempting the Trials. Su-bo was the first]

[Subaru: Nonononoweirdweirdweird. Hold on, pause, wait, something's weird all the information's messed up. Please just gimme some time to balance the books in my head for a moment]

[Lewes: You got five minutes]

Gratefully nodding to Lewes' unexpected patience, Subaru held his fingers to his temples and began desperately calling back his memories.

From the day before yesterday in the previous loop, up to the point when he first came back after passing the Trials, chewing over every minutest detail within his memory over that time,

[Subaru: ——Wha?]

In those memories, the “Inconsistencies” that shouldn't have been there, he hadn't noticed them until now.

His face contorting as he realized this fact, Subaru tried hard to contain the doubtful mutterings under his breath. [What's going on?] But once the emerging suspicion had sprouted, there was nothing to stop it from taking root and flowering atop its stems.

In Subaru's memories, Lewes said on the night before the Trials,

——No one had ever taken the Trials up to now. In the span of her entire life up to this point, there had never been a challenger.

In Subaru's memories, immediately before the Trials, and immediately after, Lewes said, ——She had taken the Trials, failed to pass, but was still kicking around safe and sound, offering it as proof that there was no harm in challenging the Trials.

In the span of a single day, her statements had completely turned on its head.

It'd be a different matter if this was purely in emotional terms, but the contradicting contents pertained to life experiences and reality itself. Such a drastic directional change in information could only be pointing to perjury, or otherwise, a precalculated lie.

Still maintaining his thinking posture, Subaru turned his gaze up toward Lewes, who was playing with her pink hair, waiting. Watching her sitting on the bed, swinging her legs that

weren't long enough to touch the floor, looking as though she was searching for something to distract herself from boredom, one could almost forget that she was a granny at heart and mistake her for a genuine little girl.

Looking back on their interactions up to now, he really didn't want to believe that she had been maliciously toying with him, but,

[Subaru: Even if some part of it was true, which ones can I believe?]

Usually, when faced with conflicting information, Subaru would just trust the words of those he wanted to trust, but he couldn't make this judgment so lightly when it was Emilia's fate resting on his decision. And much less so, considering this was a matter of life and death in the literal sense of the words. He must be cautious.

This was now the third time he and Lewes had discussed the topic of the Trials.

Once, she claimed to have challenged it, and twice, she denied any knowledge of anyone ever having taken it. Though this wasn't something that could be decided by majority, her statements claiming that she knew nothing of the Trials seemed to be more believable.

Following from that assumption, she may have lied about the Trials to the worried Subaru out of consideration, just to put his mind at ease. But if that was the case, then she should have simply explained that it was a lie——

[Subaru: Unless there was some reason she didn't do this..... maybe she's starting to go senile.....]

[Lewes: Just now, you seem to have arrived at some rather rude conclusions about me?]

[Subaru: If you could keep in mind my consistent past efforts to demonstrate my good intentions, and let that counterbalance my recent transgression, Subaru will be most grateful. Said Subaru with a stern expression on his face]

Watching Subaru mix his apologizing and clowning together, Lewes sighed, and, muttering [Ayeayeaye...], she tiredly shook her head,

[Lewes: So, did you get any answers out of that conversation with your heart?]

[Subaru: Answers or not, it's more like I've arrived at a conclusion. Um, Lewes-san, did you happen to be worried about me? Like back outside the Tomb?]

[Lewes: Worried?]

Seeing Lewes merely repeating his word like a parrot, Subaru nodded [yeah] and effeminately touched his fingertips together like a girl, and,

[Subaru(*girly voice*): Y-you once said that you never took the Trials, but outside the Tomb you told me how you took the Trials and failed but it was no big deal, right? B-but you probably just said that because you were worried about me or unless it's not like that and it's just me but I just noticed it just now that's all.....]

[Lewes: ——Ahh, so it's about that]

With a voice carrying an emotion as if having understood, Lewes interjected into Subaru's cringe-worthy rapid-fire delivery. And, seeing Subaru furrow his brows in astonishment upon hearing the sound of her voice, she smiled, and,

[Lewes: Su-bo, I'll let you in on something good. Consider it special]

[Subaru: Something good?]

[Lewes: Owing to my contract, I am forbidden to "Lie". And so, whenever I am asked an inappropriate question, I could only choose to answer with silence. Without exceptions, this could not be changed for anyone's sake. Lying is forbidden. And this is true for myself, as well as every single one of the residents of the Sanctuary]

[Subaru: You cannot... lie.....?]

In front of her sudden confession, Subaru's only impulse was confusion.

Because, if what Lewes said was true, then the premise of everything Subaru had

considered so far would be turned on its head. Or rather, even before that, if what she said was true, then the whole situation that brought about his suspicions in the first place would have been completely self-contradictory.

——If she was incapable of lying, then how was it that she had created a situation that couldn't have come about unless she lied?

[Subaru: Tha.....]

[Lewes: Just now, I have already told the utmost limit of what I could tell you. I cannot answer any questions beyond that. Misery would befall us both if we violate the contract. If you wish to know more, instead of asking this ancient self who had stopped in her tracks, you should ask one of those who had ventured ahead]

Having been preemptively denied, Subaru could only close his opened mouth and fall back into silence.

Subaru had only been able to carry on this conversation by relying on Lewes' goodwill, so once she had rejected him like this, there was nothing he could do. But she had also given him a hint as well.

By picking up that fact alone, Subaru keenly sensed that she had not been lying about her desire to be liberated from this place.

[Subaru: Understood, I won't ask any more than that. Let's change the topic... to something else]

[Lewes: You sure're an odd one. You already know you can't get anything else important out of me, and you still wish to drink tea and chat with an old-timer like me?]

[Subaru: I've already missed breakfast time, and there's not much for me to do until Emilia-tan wakes up. I get pissed off just looking at Roswaal, Garfiel bares his fangs at me, and bantering with Otto's way too exhausting, so I'll just deepen my precious friendship with my Loli-Granny]

Standing up, Subaru collected the two cups of now thoroughly-cold tea and headed to the kitchen, followed by Lewes' gaze,

[Subaru: Don't worry. For a time, even though it was kinda short-term, I made a living as a servant in Roswaal's Mansion, you know. They've taught me a thing or two about brewing tea, at least]

[Lewes: Hm. Then allow me to wait with expectations]

[Subaru: Uwa, PURESSHA—]

Saying this as he poured the tea into the teacups, he handed one to Lewes and returned to his seat. Facing each other, they sipped down the new tea, and,

[Lewes: Not too bad at all]

[Subaru: Even when I brew it myself I still just taste leaves. Now, for the new topic]

[Lewes: I won't be listening if you want to continue the topic from before. But otherwise..... well, I would still respond to any other topics as earnestly as I could]

[Subaru: Alright, I'll hold you to your words then]

Seeing a tinge of guilt forming on Lewes' little face, Subaru's lips twisted into a mischievous smile.

[Subaru: Do you know anything that bastard Garfiel's scared of, or any stuff he hates? Like something that'll make him faint soon as he sees them?]

[Lewes: Su-bo... have you ever noticed the way you try so hard is a little crooked?]

And, with that, he managed to put onto Lewes' face the single most peculiar expression of the entire past hour.

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After their conversation over tea came to an end, having cleaned up the cups, Subaru left the lonely Loli-Granny who claimed she wanted to be alone and came out of the house. About an hour had passed, or perhaps a little longer, he thought. But, seeing that the sun that was supposed to have only just risen now hanging high up in the sky, and feeling that the temperature had grown warmer as well, it could easily have been longer than that. Judging from bodily sensations alone, it was probably a little after 10am.

[Subaru: It's a perfect sunny day for drying out a futon too, what a waste..... why do I get the feeling I've completely shed being a hikikomori with that thought just now!]

To think, that bathed under the light of the Sun, the first thing that came to his mind was doing laundry. As an archetype of the unhealthy slackers, this was utterly inconceivable. But, setting aside such sentiments for now,

[Subaru: It's about time, Emilia should be waking up soon. She's probably still scared from last night... I better take the chance to imprint some of my sense of presence while she's weak]

Even while muttering this rather devious declaration, deep down, he genuinely worried about Emilia as he sped up his steps.

As soon as he could, and for as long as he could, he will stay at her side and comfort her. Because, one way or another——

[Subaru: Tomorrow, I'll have no choice but to leave her side]

This afternoon, Roswaal will formally put forth the proposal to free the refugees of Arlam. Then, if they begin preparations right away, they would be able to depart from the Sanctuary tomorrow.

Subaru will accompany them once again, for there was something he'd have to take care of at the Mansion.

[Subaru: If I want to know more, instead of asking someone who had halted their steps, I should be asking someone who had ventured ahead..... geez, that sure was a roundabout way to say it]

Of course, without saying it in this roundabout way, she wouldn't have been able to convey what she wanted to convey.

Somewhat pitying her for having to go through all this trouble, Subaru let out a sigh, and sped up his steps once more,

[Subaru: I'll be eagerly waiting to hear your stories about your good-for-nothing little brother and your troublesome hometown, Frederica!]

Chapter 30 [Incongruities On The Road Back Home]

Roswaal's proposal——To release the refugees of Arlam.

Like the last time, the proposal itself passed without much resistance. Seeing no point in keeping the refugees in the Sanctuary any longer, it was only natural. But of course, unlike last time, there was no accompanying condition that Subaru should challenge the Trials.

[Subaru: This time I'm totally getting hated on by the guy who came up with that condition, after all.....]

[Emilia: What's wrong, Subaru?]

[Subaru: Nnno, it's nothing. Speaking of which, is Emilia-tan feeling better? Have you calmed down a bit? If I'm too much of a nuisance in the room I could go outside if you want?]

Flapping his hand with an awkward smile, Subaru said this to the girl beside him——
Emilia.

They were in the bedroom that Lewes lent to Emilia, sitting on the side of the bed, and passing the time without talking about anything particularly interesting.

The time was dusk, approaching the fall of night.

—

After waking up a little before noon, Emilia had some late breakfast before they went to settle the negotiations between Roswaal and Lewes on the matter of the refugees. The discussion proceeded without any problems, and they agreed on releasing the refugees the following day, and dissolved their meeting there——

[Garfiel: So, t'state the obvious..... Emilia-sama'll be challengin' the Trials t'night, yeah?]

As if laying down a warning, Garfiel's words didn't leave much room for interpretation. Pressing down the urge to click his tongue, Subaru stole a glance at Emilia, and, although it was only for a brief moment, he saw on the side of her face a fleeting trace of fear and grief. In fact, he was almost certain that Emilia will fail the Trial tonight.

Unlike Subaru, who had passed the Trial owing to his memories, Emilia's condition ultimately hadn't changed at all. In order for Emilia to pass the Trial, Subaru will have to take actions to create some drastic changes in the environment around her.

Yet, in this loop, Subaru couldn't see a single way to change her environment in such a short period of time. ——If she challenges the Trial tonight, it will only be wearing her down.

[Subaru: But she wouldn't breathe a word of complaint or even think of giving up... that's just like Emilia-tan]

In front of Garfiel's provocative question, Emilia hid away that momentary emotion within her eyes, and firmly answered, [Of course I will].

Garfiel narrowed his eyes as if impressed by her reply, and Roswaal quietly whistled, which only added to Subaru's irritation.

But in the end, there was no way to stop this. There were only a few hours left before the start of the Trial tonight.

—

After ending their talks there, she ate lunch not long after her breakfast, and it was about three hours later when they got back to the house. In that time, following by her side, Subaru had been constantly talking to Emilia—— but as the hour of the Trials neared, he noticed she was speaking less and less.

By now, her words have become almost exclusively reacting to Subaru's. But——
[Emilia: Umn..... I'd prefer if you... don't go]

[Subaru: AaAHHH, UNDERSTOOD. NO PROBLEM. Until Emilia-tan's settles down, I will just keep focusing on savoring the air Emilia-tan breathes out, so don't worry]

[Emilia: I reeeaaally don't like the sound of that.but, stay here]

Faced with the complexities of a young girl's heart, Subaru shrugged his shoulders and stayed like she asked.

Although they were sitting right next to each other, he was still too useless to find the courage to take her hand. But still, he was honestly glad to be needed. By none other than Emilia, after all.

Even if, to her, it must have only been filling the void of losing the one whom she relied on the most.

Ever since coming to the Sanctuary—— or more accurately, ever since Puck stopped responding to her calls after they returned to the Mansion, Emilia's attitude toward Subaru had consistently softened.

A part of him was overjoyed to be given a place within her heart, but there was another part of Subaru that was quietly concerned about this development.

That part of him wondered what could be the dangers of Emilia losing her strongest anchor.

[Emilia:Hmm?]

[Subaru: Nothing at all? I was just thinking Emilia-tan's eyelashes are so long and cute, I kinda wanna eat them]

[Emilia: Subaru, you keep saying you want to eat my hair, eat my eyelashes, or lick my cheeks..... are you, into that sort of thing?]

[Subaru: Where I come from, that's the greatest possible expression of love, you know~]

Seeing Emilia relaxing slightly and sulking at his comments, Subaru scratched at his cheeks.

Although Subaru would consider making licking-noises to be the utmost confession of love, actually doing so would have been extremely creepy. This was especially true in a

world that didn't understand these sorts of things. So he should pay attention to what he says. Although it was too late now.

Occasionally, Subaru would try to take Emilia's mind off of things by talking about random stuff like this. He now knew some fragments of Emilia's past. And if he mentions this to her, perhaps something dramatically different from last time might happen,

——But no matter how he thought about it, he felt it wouldn't be a change for the better.

No matter what the situation becomes, in the end, what he needed was time.

He needed time to help Emilia come to terms with her past and find the resolve within her own heart. And he also needed time to mention the fragments of her past to her, and ask her for the truth of what happened. Time, time, time. There wasn't nearly enough time.

[Subaru: Just why do I have to always rush from one thing to another all the time. Ever since coming to this World, was there even a time when I got to properly relax a bit?]

Searching through his memories, if there was a time he managed to spend relatively quietly, it would've been the few weeks after he settled the problem with the Wolgarms in the forest.

Before and after that, it was just continuous turmoil without a moment's rest. It was a miracle that he didn't die of overwork.

And, as he was thinking about these unnutritious thoughts,

[Emilia: ——Subaru]

He was a little slow to react to her abrupt call. Turning toward the direction of the voice—— Subaru saw Emilia's wet, violet eyes very close to him, staring at him.

He was so enchanted in that moment by those tear-drenched eyes that his heart thumped so loudly he was afraid it was going to stop. Subaru gasped. And, seeing him do this, a wavering resolve and hesitation appeared within Emilia's eyes. Perhaps she was trying to decide whether to tell Subaru something before the Trial.

[Subaru: What is it?]

Subaru tried to say this as gently as he could, being careful not to rush her. If she could make up her mind here, then he mustn't disturb her.

However, hearing Subaru's reply, Emilia only turned down her gaze,

[Emilia: ah..... mn, sorry. It's nothing. I just, wanted to call you]

[Subaru: ——oh, is that right. J-JUST WANTED TO CALL ME!? Why do I get the feeling that's something couples say when they're already in a relationship!]

[Emilia: I... guess I have to go soon.....]

Her resolve was gone. Subaru regretted having missed the opportunity, but he pretended not to notice and puffed up his chest nonetheless. Emilia stood up while listening to his voice, and looked outside the window at the Sun that was beginning to set.

[Emilia: ——I have to head to the Tomb. Subaru will only accompany me halfway, right?]

[Subaru: Even if I beg Garfiel to let me see you off to the Entrance, I don't think I can persuade him.Emilia, although I know there's no point in me saying this, but...]

[Emilia: ——It's alright. You don't need to say it, Subaru]

....."Don't push yourself too hard." Emilia already knew what he was going to say, and stopped him before he could say it.

In front of Subaru's quivering lips, a courageous smile emerged on Emilia's cheeks, and she held up a finger in front of her lips,

[Emilia: I'm fine, although everyone might not think so after how flustered I was yesterday, I'll do my best. I want to do my best. And I have to do my best, I think]

Suddenly clenching the hand in front of her face into a fist, [That's why], she continued,

[Emilia: If you want to say something to me, don't say "It's alright to give up". You should say "Do your best", and cheer me on instead. As long as I know there's one person who still believes in me, I'm sure I can find the strength to do it]

[Subaru: Believe in you... of course I believe in you, Emilia-tan. The only guy in existence who might possibly expect as much from you as I do is probably that daddy-cat, you know. —So, do your best]

[Emilia: Mn, I'll do my best]

For the first time today, Emilia smiled without the hint of putting up a facade. Relieved to see her smile, Subaru stood up as well and followed her out of the building.

In the Sanctuary after nightfall, a chilling wind was blowing.

Caressed by the wind, Emilia's silver hair danced and glittered as she made her way forward.

Like a silver river flowing under the moonlight, Subaru watched from behind as she forged on with her stalwart steps,

—Although he knew that she will fail tonight.

The objective of bringing the refugees back to Roswaal's estate was achieved two days earlier than last time.

Aside from the date, there was not much difference compared to the previous loop. The refugees boarded the dragon carriages in an orderly manner, and the hired travelling-merchants were released from the Sanctuary along with them. Subaru and Otto accompanied them as well.

If there was any difference, it would be,

[Subaru: I did ask for a guide, but I'm pretty surprised it's Lewes-san. Normally, this kind of thing could just be done by an underling..... or something like that, right?]

[Lewes: What, you don't like that it's me? After we've already drank tea and talked together, Su-bo is still so cold towards me, my heart is devastated]

Saying this, the Loli-Granny looked like she was actually going to cry. Squeezing her tiny body onto the tightly-packed driver's bench, she self-righteously claimed a spot in the

middle, right next to Subaru. The driver's bench was originally meant for two people, and with the little girl Lewes added to it, the situation became considerably more difficult.

[Otto: Mnmn, I feel the same way. Natsuki-san sure doesn't know how to be modest or considerate of others at all, he probably left all his subtleties back in his mother's womb, you know]

[Lewes: Hey, Su-bo. Who's that unfamiliar looking fella on the driver's bench?]

[Otto: Is that how low my standing is in your mind!?!]

Just when Otto thought he had found another fellow victim of Subaru's, he was immediately thrown under the bus. Despite holding the reins that were literally the lifelines of everyone on the carriage, he was still completely overlooked.

A shadow descended on his unexpectedly neat-looking features, and,

[Otto: Aaahhh..... I get the feeling that ever since coming here I didn't manage to leave a single impression except as the guy who keeps shouting all the time. Did I really not make any impression on Margrave Mathers?]

[Subaru: You managed to show him your usual relaxed self, and he laughed so hard he burst the wounds on his belly... that was a pretty deep impression, I'd say?]

[Otto: There are good impressions and bad impressions in this world, and which kind would you call an impression about bursting someone's belly?]

[Subaru: And this is what he says after bursting someone's belly..... hopeless, this guy]

[Otto: If I'm hopeless then you're a hundred-and-twenty percent hopeless!]

Otto's reason for coming to the Sanctuary, his introduction to Roswaal, was completed without much delay. Everything proceeded the same way as last time, and in fact, bursting out laughing when he saw Otto's demeanor, Roswaal's evaluation of him couldn't have

been low.

Although, one gets the feeling that Roswaal didn't exactly see him as a merchant.

[Subaru: Well, long as you've got me looking out for you, you'll be sticking around for a long time. Either way, you've already seen the top secret documents of the Mathers domain so there's no way you can run away]

[Otto: You know, meeting you was the end of my luck, Natsuki-san..... but, I've already resigned myself to my fate in a way, so nevermind]

As expected, still not disheartened after encountering misfortune on the road, Otto indeed had the fundamental qualities of a travelling merchant at heart. Even if he wasn't destined for greatness at the end of the road he had taken, he wouldn't regret the choice he had made.

Deep down, Subaru did feel a sense of friendship for the guy who stayed with him for a reason like this.

[Subaru: I'll be looking forward to working you like a horse from now on! Otto!]

[Otto: What's he saying with that refreshing expression, this guy!]

Otto wailed as Subaru patted him on the shoulder and shot him a thumbs-up.

Seeing Lewes, squished between them, plugging her ears, Subaru looked down from the dragon carriage ready for departure, and,

[Subaru: ——Then, we're off, Emilia-tan]

[Emilia: Mn, be careful]

Lifting her hand in front of her chest with a little wave, Emilia replied while timidly seeing them off.

——Last night, Subaru accompanied her to challenge the Trials. The result, as he already knew, was that she failed. Since Subaru was not allowed to follow her into the Tomb, the Trial was not interrupted halfway through, and in the end, as if in a daze, Emilia had to

crawl herself out of the Tomb, her eyes trembling, before collapsing into Subaru's arms and losing consciousness.

Staying by her side the whole night as she slept, Subaru could not remember how many times he had to wipe away her tears from her sleeping face.

To see her worn down like this, it would be a lie to say that he wasn't worried to leave her here. He wanted to stay beside her for as long as he could, and hold up her trembling body, but,

[Subaru: I'll be back in a day or two, so don't push yourself. Now that the villagers are gone, there's no need to rush. Slowly and surely, we can take our time and conquer the Trials]

[Emilia: That's.....right. Mn, if you say so, Subaru.....]

Without any of the returning strength he had seen in her smile the night before, her smile now was weak, and felt like no more than a fleeting facade. In fact, she was already forcing herself just by standing here, seeing them off. Or perhaps, she was distracting herself so she could forget the things that were weighing on her heart.

[Subaru: Ram, I don't mean to remind you, but...]

[Ram: Ram is finding it doubtful what that could be other than a reminder.But don't worry. As much as I hate to say this, I share Barusu's opinion. This should be seen as a long-term matter. Unless there are orders from Roswaal-sama, I'll keep Garf in check]

[Subaru: I'm in your debt..... although that sounds super-scary. I'll repay you some other way]

[Ram: Tch. Barusu is unexpectedly perceptive for a change]

[Subaru: Just now, I think I've inadvertently avoided another DEATH FLAG there——!]

Clicking her tongue, Ram politely bowed without fail as she saw them off. She took a step back, and Subaru sat up straight on the driver's bench, ready to depart—— when he saw, at the back of the group of people sending them off, a golden-haired youth crossing his arms, staring at him.

The same time Subaru noticed Garfiel, Garfiel noticed him as well as their gazes met. Over their crossing gazes, neither could tell what emotions the other must be feeling, and after what happened to Emilia last night, there was even less ground for reconciliation between them.

[Subaru: Ugh. I gotta find some clues to get through to him somehow.....]

[Otto: Natsuki-san? It's about time to head out, shall we go?]

[Subaru: Yeah, let's go. Lewes-san, we're counting on you]

[Lewes: Leave it to me]

Lewes nodded with a spirited reply, and Otto, holding the reins, gave the signal to Patrasche and Furufu. The dragon carriages started to move, and the great migration of the refugees was underway.

Far from reaching full speed, the dragon carriages proceeded at a crawling pace. This was inevitable, considering the passengers were primarily women, children and the elderly.

[Subaru: Even so, it seems everyone's faces have lighted up because they know they're going home]

[Lewes: Home, it does hold that kind of power. No matter how unremarkable, how banal it is, in the end, there is where people's hearts will remain]

Lewes followed on Subaru's whisper as he watched the long procession behind him. Hearing her remarks, Subaru crossed his arms and tilted his head [Is that right?],

[Subaru: Lewes-san, do you also feel attached to the Sanctuary, after all?]

[Lewes:Well, who knows. In my case, I'm in a special situation where I know nothing except that place. And just the thought of another place terrifies me, I often find]

[Subaru: Terrifies you?]

[Lewes: To set foot into a completely unknown place is a terrifying thing, Su-bo. For me, this ancient self who had passed her years in vain, this is especially so]

With an aged smile emerging on her face, Lewes turned her eyes to the distance. But, since she looked like a little girl, no matter how serious she tried to be, he found it extremely difficult to see her as anything except a little girl stretching up her back pretending she's older.

And, intermittently exchanging this casual conversation, the procession of dragon carriages continued its way through the forest. It would be about an eight-hour one-way journey to get there. The Divine Protection of Wind Evasion ensured that the journey would feel like sitting on a royal-class seat, but that also made time appear to pass slower.

[Lewes: Such a clever ground dragon. She's barely made any mistakes even without me guiding the way]

[Subaru: Yeah, she's my kawaii-little-pride-and-joy, you know. It might be strange for me to be the one saying this, but all the characters around me are pretty HIGH-LEVEL, aren't they?]

Beginning with the members of Roswaal's Mansion, and then with the start of the Royal Selection, all the people he encountered were at the top of their respective fields. It was miserable how much his mediocrity stood out while mingling with them, although now, he was looking on the bright side.

Already behind by a lap at the starting point, he had nonetheless started running. To catch

up to them, the only thing he had to do was to keep running—— and he had already been given the strength to do so.

[Subaru: Now that I think about it, while I'm grateful and all that you've come all this way to guide us, how will Lewes-san get back? If all the dragon carriages are heading to Arlam village, you won't have any transportation, right?]

[Lewes: No need to worry, I'll just walk back on my own two legs like a normal person. Just so you know, these legs of mine aren't about to lose to the youngsters, you know?]

Pat Pat, Lewes gave her short tiny legs swept along by the motion of the carriage a pat. In other words, it was completely unpersuasive, but Subaru didn't have the heart to shatter the little girl's confidence,

[Subaru: I got it I got it..... Oy, Otto. Think you got the strength of will to carry a loli back to the Sanctuary?]

[Otto: Since I don't know what the intention behind that question is, do you mind if I refuse to answer that?]

[Subaru: You hear that, Lewes san? Looks like we can't even count on this guy to carry a little girl back home through a dark and scary forest. A little girl or two, he couldn't care less]

[Lewes: That's terrible, how desolate people's hearts have become]

[Otto: You two have totally teamed up against me, haven't you!?!]

As usual, Otto's wail shattered through the silence of the forest. Lewes and Subaru looked at each other and smiled, then she turned up her face, and,

[Lewes: Almost there]

Hearing Lewes' whisper, Subaru furrowed his brows. But that very same moment, Lewes' body abruptly leaned towards him. Softly catching her tiny body, [Huh?] Subaru slightly raised his voice,

[Subaru: Otto, stop. Lewes-san's looking a little strange]

[Otto: Should we, go back to the village?]

At Subaru's short call, Otto pulled on the reins and brought the dragon carriage to a stop. Giving the same instruction to the rest of the line behind them, one by one, he heard the ground dragons' cries as they halted.

Then, in his arms, Lewes raised her little hand,

[Lewes:Sorry, there's no need to go back. It's only the effect of coming so close to the Barrier. If I advance any further into the forest, I can't guarantee that I will stay conscious]

[Subaru: The Barrier..... the same thing happened to Emilia when she entered the Sanctuary]

In Subaru's time, it was already a week ago when he first arrived at the Sanctuary. Like in the shaking dragon carriage just now, Emilia lost consciousness, and then they were greeted by Garfiel's rude welcoming.

Lewes's expression looked just like Emilia's back then, and if the dragon carriage continued any further, her consciousness might be ripped out just like Emilia's was.

[Subaru: Say, this Barrier really knows how to tell us apart. Whether it's the sensitive-skinned me, or the insensitive-skinned Otto, neither of us can feel a thing]

[Otto: Insensitive-skinned, what's that supposed to mean? My skin doesn't feel particularly sensitive or insensitive here]

[Subaru: That's what happens when young people don't take care of their skin, once you gradually start getting SPOTS & FRECKLES in your late twenties, you'll regret your ignorance earlier on in life]

[Otto: I seriously have no idea what you're saying anymore, but, getting back on topic, this is where we say goodbye to Lewes-san..... isn't it?]

Disregarding Subaru's random commentary, Otto turned to Lewes. And, on the receiving end, Lewes nodded with a pained expression on her face,

[Lewes: Well, yes. This is as far as I go. Those born inside the Sanctuary have terrible compatibility with the Barrier. It has been a long time since I came this far..... Well, there was nothing special]

[Subaru: Unless, was testing the Barrier part of why you came along?]

[Lewes: It seems I was too optimistic with that thought. The result is as you see.It's not possible, after all. The Sanctuary can only be liberated by completing the Trials. That much is clear, Su-bo]

Under the little girl's gaze, Subaru realized that she had come all this way to personally confirm that they were truly imprisoned within the Sanctuary. And he could see how much she wanted to be outside the Sanctuary, and that it was all too natural that she would want this.

[Subaru: Emilia would probably feel the same thing if she came this far]

[Lewes: Since she has already come inside, it would be so. Not all residents of the Sanctuary were born and raised here. Ros-bo would occasionally come to bring in those with similar circumstances from the outside. Those children too, become properties of the Witch from the moment they enter the Sanctuary. Emilia-sama is no exception]

[Subaru:there it is again, kinda feels like I've just heard some information I can't let slide...]

Roswaal brought new residents into the Sanctuary from the outside——if they were people who are affected by the Barrier, it would mean they were half-bloods as well.

[Subaru: Then he's bringing them in and shutting them in here? Oyoy, the hell's he thinking?]

[Lewes: As for his true intentions.....I cannot rightly say. When you get back, you should ask Ros-bo this yourself, Su-bo]

Lewes powerlessly shook her head, and pulled herself out of the frowning Subaru's arms. As she lightly jumped her tiny body down from the coachman's stand, Patrasche extended her head over to her, and Lewes patted her on the neck,

[Lewes: Good ground dragon. Become your master's strength, now]

Patrasche nudged her nose on Lewes in reply, acknowledging her words. In fact. without coming off as boasting, this was the first time Subaru had seen Patrasche being so intimate with anyone except him. Even Otto had eaten quite a few head-butts while trying to have conversations with her.

[Subaru: There are all sorts of things I still need to do in the Sanctuary, so once I've asked all I want to ask from Frederica, I'll come right back]

[Lewes: That would be best.This is only my intuition, but without you here, I don't think anything will be moving forward inside the Sanctuary]

[Subaru: That's another huge over-evaluation to dump on me..... even if it's just intuition]

[Lewes: It's the intuition of a woman who has lived over a hundred years, you know?]

[Subaru: The way to see that depends on whether we look at its good side or not, I guess]

Replying to Lewes this way, Subaru politely bowed from atop the coachman's stand.

Watching her back away from the carriage, Otto quietly spilled [We're going],

[Subaru: Yeah, see you again, Lewes-san. Take care on your way back]

[Lewes: Mmm. You'll get out of the forest if you go straight ahead from here. Keep going until you hit the road, and then the ground dragons can take it from there. Take care]

Waving her little hand, Lewes bid them farewell. Otto waved the signal flag and the line of dragon carriages resumed its march.

After watching them leave, Lewes turned her back and headed into the depths of the forest. Watching her little figure disappear into the gaps between the trees, praying that she would get back safely—— Subaru felt a lump inside his chest that he couldn't put into words.

[Subaru:Something just, feels off]

He had felt a sense of incongruity in their previous conversation. But, unable to quite put his finger on what it was, Subaru relinquished his weight onto the rocking of the dragon carriage.

Coming out of the forest, into the radiant light of the sun, the road broadened out before them—— they had crossed the Barrier, and left the Sanctuary.

From here, there was still a long, long road ahead.

There were things he must do, and things he must say.

With these weighing down like mountains, Subaru continued on in the swaying dragon carriage.

Chapter 31 [Maid ▪ Maid ▪ Maid]

——For Subaru, this would be the second time returning to Roswaal's Mansion from the Sanctuary.

[Subaru: Although it was just a painful experience the first time.....]

Subaru scratched his cheeks mumbling this, and jumped down from Patrasche's back outside the gate.

After bidding farewell to Lewes, Subaru and the refugees returned to Arlam village safe and sound. Although, since they had already done so in the last loop, and having his trusted Patrasche to guide the way, there was nothing he had to worry about.

[Subaru: The villagers are rejoicing, and Otto's staying behind in the village like last time. I was originally hoping to bring Otto along as a meat shield though.....]

Actually, Subaru hesitated about dragging Otto along to the mansion. After all, there was a good chance it could get genuinely dangerous, and bringing Otto, who doesn't last well in intense situations, along probably wasn't a good idea.

In terms of a straight-up brawl, Subaru couldn't win against Otto, but Otto wasn't exactly a god-like martial artist. Subaru wasn't particularly looking forward to seeing his organs in front of the Bowel Hunter.

[Subaru: I hope nothing happened.....]

Last time, Subaru returned to the Mansion six days after the beginning of the Trials. This time, it was three. ——Compared to before, he still had three days of leeway.

Presumably, the Mansion was attacked on the same night Subaru was killed. Taking all the factors into consideration, that much should be certain. The problem was,

[Subaru: Three days left..... in other words, I'd have to get the information out of Frederica and head back to the Sanctuary, fix the problems in the Sanctuary, and then

force march back to the Mansion with Garfiel. Just looking at time alone, it's not impossible, but.....]

There were tremendous hurdles to overcome before he could turn these empty theories to reality.

It takes 8 hours just to clear the one-way route from the Sanctuary to the Mansion. Going back and forth once would already take up almost a day in travel time. Counting the loss of time in between as well, the amount of usable time available to Subaru becomes all the more severe.

[Subaru: There are backup plans for solving the problem as well..... If I choose the optimal plan, it will be an arduous route even in the most optimistic cases.....]

Knowing ahead of time when Elsa will attack, the optimal solution for Subaru would be to repel the assassin. This way, they wouldn't need to be constantly looking over their shoulders and be frightened by every shadow. In other words, he was hoping for complete victory, if possible.

To accomplish this, they must exceed Elsa in combat strength, which would require having either Roswaal or Garfiel. But at the moment, the likelihood of bringing either of them back to the Mansion was not looking high.

[Subaru: So in the end, there's no choice but to go for the second-best option..... huh]

While Subaru was muttering this despondently and scratching at his head, Patrasche brought her nose over. Smiling awkwardly at the face of the ground dragon that was nudging against his shoulder, Subaru rubbed his palm over her hard scaly skin, and patted her on the head,

[Subaru: The rewards match the risks, but we aren't ready to bring nearly enough winning chances to counterbalance the risk. Which pretty much just leaves us with the turn tail and run and scatter like a bunch of baby spiders battle-plan]

At the time of his battle with the Witch Cult, this was a conclusion that had crossed his mind.

But while this was possible due to the number of pieces he had last time, this time, there weren't as many hands he could play. Even with prior knowledge of the incoming attack, he would be more than satisfied if they could just manage to escape.

But, there were problems with that as well.

[Subaru: Everyone in the Mansion. Rem, Petra, Frederica..... and Beako, I don't know if they'll all cooperate with evacuation. Honestly, if I just piggyback Rem and hold Petra's hand I'll be able to bring them along, but I'll probably break a few bones before I could convince the other two]

Of course, if it ever comes down to it, he would drag everyone into the dragon carriage by force and abduct them away if he had to. He didn't think he'd be able to beat them in a fight, but if he kept yanking on their arms and wouldn't let go, he might just manage it somehow. No, he definitely will.

[Subaru: ——Huu]

Exhaling a small sigh, Subaru felt the weight of the responsibility on his shoulders.

How many people's fates were resting on his words, his actions, and his resolve. On the night before the battle with the White Whale, he had felt this way as well.

[Subaru: It won't do any good to procrastinate outside the gates forever. I still don't know if anything happened inside. Better make sure everyone's fine first.....]

[???: And after that?]

[Subaru: After that, I'll think about how to persuade them. Oh yeah, I got it, since they won't know anyway, I'll just lie and tell them that it's Roswaal's instructions or something.....]

[???: Woaa. You're so bad~, Subaru]

[Subaru: Just call me DIRTYWILD, I'm still at an age to aspire towards this kind of bad-boy image, you know..... wh]

In the middle of his sentence, Subaru heard the sound of giggling coming from behind and turned around. And, in the Mansion's front gardens on the other side of the gate, there was a little maid—— the familiar little girl, Petra, standing there.

In front of the surprised-looking Subaru raising his brows, she shook her chestnut-colored hair and adorably tilted her head,

[Petra: Welcome back, Subaru-sama. Your return has come earlier than I thought]

[Subaru: Yeah, I'm back..... looks like I just caught a glimpse of the results of Frederica's education for the gifted. Thanks for the reception]

At the sight of Petra picking up the hems of her skirt in a curtsy, Subaru loosened his cheeks in relief, before softly pushing open the gate and stepping inside. As he went on leading Patrasche toward the ground dragon stables, Subaru looked down at Petra walking alongside him.

[Petra: ——?]

Seeing Subaru looking at her, she made a strange expression and hurriedly turned her back and began cleaning up her hair and smoothing out her dress. After she seemed satisfied with all that, [O-K], she turned back to Subaru with a nod,

[Petra: What is it, Subaru-sama?]

And, with a smile even more radiant than before, she showed him her adorable smile. Merging the cuteness of a little girl, and a promise of future beauty, it was a smile that, in spite of its youth, carried a fiendish power to abduct the hearts of the opposite sex. It was a perfect smile calculated with a complete understanding of how it would be perceived by others. Presented with such a smile, Subaru had to suck in a bit of air, [Subaru: Aaaahhh, that! Isn't that just way too adorable, youuu!]

[Petra: Wa, waaah!?!]

Completely oblivious to her underlying intentions, Subaru wrapped the little girl in a hug as if that was the reaction she requested and started affectionately rubbing her head with a variety of complex petting techniques without any regard for restraint. Petra squeaked out a confused cry at the sudden action, but,

[Subaru: You don't even know half of what I'm feeling right now. Youuu, youuu! Aaahhh, damn I'm so happy to see you again!!]

[Petra: Wha what, what's going on!? Wah, wait, Subaru..... it's too early for me to.....]

[Subaru: Really, I'm so glad.....]

[Petra: ——Subaru?]

Her face all blushing, struggling in his arms, Petra's expression changed. She settled in his arms, and looked up at Subaru who had lowered his voice, and, gradually, the at-once embarrassed and delighted expression disappeared from her face.

[Petra: Are you, hurting somewhere.....?]

Worried, she extended out a finger and touched his trembling cheeks. Then, a palm pressed against her fingers, and with [I'm alright], Subaru shook his head.

He inhaled a deep breath through his nostrils, and paused for a second. And then, opening his eyes once more,

[Subaru: I'm just seriously, from the bottom of my heart, relieved. ——I'm home, Petra]

——After returning Patrasche to the stables, Subaru returned to the Mansion holding Petra's hand since she wanted to hold hands with him. Fortunately, according to Petra, no noteworthy changes had taken place since Subaru left the Mansion.

[Petra: Right now, big-sister-sama Frederica is away inspecting the Boundaries in the mountains, so she'll be back after a little while..... maybe]

As Petra informed him of the Head Maid's absence, Subaru recalled the Boundaries in the mountains—— that is, the magical crystals that sealed out the Wolgarms. Though the Wolgarms in the mountains were supposed to have been eradicated, the Boundaries remained in service even now.

It seems, aside from the Wolgarms, there were other dangerous Mabeasts that needed to be kept out by the Boundaries, and, as the managers of Arlam village, the task of maintaining them fell to the subjects of the Roswaal camp.

[Petra: Once everyone in the village comes back, they can check for breaks in the Boundaries themselves, but since everyone hasn't come back yet, big-sister-sama Frederica is doing it]

[Subaru: Now that you're calling her big-sister-sama, it sounds like you two have gotten closer while I was away, kinda makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. Also, the villagers are all back now, you know]

[Petra: Really?]

When he pointed in the direction of the village, Petra's eyes lighted up and she squeaked out an excited cry.

Her family was among those who evacuated to the Capital, so both her parents had already been safely returned to the village. But even so, she was still separated from neighbors and friends. Now that she knew they were safe, Petra happily clapped her hands.

[Subaru: Yeah, you should go see them later. I'm sure they'll be excited to see you in your maid's uniform]

[Petra: Yeah. Once I get permission from big-sister-sama Frederica, I'll go change!]

[Subaru: No, there's no need to change..... You look cute in it, you should let everyone see.....]

[Petra: Ehehee, cute? I'm cute?]

[Subaru: Yeah you're cute, you're cute. So everyone sh.....]

[Petra: Yeah! I'll change and go see them!]

It pretty much turned into a situation where no matter how many times he tried saying [No it's fine], his voice kept getting canceled out by her peals of thunder.

Seeing that she was definitely not planning to change her mind about this, Subaru gave up making any further proposals.

Cracking the bones of his neck, [...ah], Subaru exhaled a deep breath and stopped.

They were on the Mansion's second floor—— rubbing his soles on the carpet, he had lifted up his face and was staring at a door. Petra, feeling a little lonely, let go of his fingers. She was a smart girl who could read the mood.

[Subaru: I'm sorry, Petra. Let me be alone with her, for a little while]

[Petra: Mn, I understand. I'll go finish cleaning up the west wing, please call me if you need anything]

As though she knew even before Subaru spoke, Petra put away her young girl's demeanors and returned to the role of a maid, and, with a slight bow, she left him there. Receiving this gesture of consideration from her, despite there being a mountain of pressing matters closing in on him, Subaru lightly poked himself in the head.

Poking, and——

[Subaru: I asked myself what I should give priority to..... and I wound up coming here]

Pushing open the door, Subaru slowly stepped into the room.

A room where time had stopped. In that plain and simple room, there was a bed—— and on it, a young girl was sleeping. The girl was no longer wearing her familiar servant's

dress, but was now wrapped in a light blue nightgown.

Her eyes were closed, and not even her faint breathing could be heard. Only, the silent rise and fall of her chest gave proof that she still lives.

[Subaru:Rem]

Lending voice to that name, who could understand the vortex of emotions carried within that single word. That unstoppable torrent of emotion, meant for only one person in the world.

He had resolved to be strong, to turn his heart to steel, to not waver in the face of all difficulties. Resolved to no longer depend on others, and to hold his head high.

——But, in front of her, all this determination scattered into mist.

The Subaru who told Emilia to leave it to him, who took her hand and told her he will find a way, the Subaru who once did so with so much strength. The facade of that resolve fell apart the moment he stood before her.

[Subaru: I'm pathetic..... I'm so... weak]

As soon as he was in front of Rem, Subaru returned to the weak Natsuki Subaru he once was.

Returned to the time before Rem's devotion had affirmed him, to the time before he first stood up.

Slowly, he reached out to her sleeping face and gently swept aside the hair on her forehead. Asleep, her expression did not change, and he had not found a single clue to restoring her eaten self.

But if he did nothing and let her go on sleeping like this, it would be certain that even her vessel will be lost as well.

[Subaru: Maybe you didn't mean to, but because of you, my resolve has been hardened]

Weak and fragile, the surface of his heart that would break off at the touch was slowly covered over with steel.

The fact that Rem's sleeping figure and the certain beating of her heart still existed allowed Natsuki Subaru to return to that instant. To the emotions of that moment when he was reborn.

[Subaru: Because you told me that it's alright even if I am weak, you told me that you will help me become stronger..... I will find a way, no matter what it takes, and stand up no matter how many times I fall]

No matter what pain, what suffering, what hardship or unpleasantness awaited him, the love of her entire soul healed Subaru, and sent the desire into his heart to move forward in return.

[Subaru: You, and Petra and everyone else..... I will bring you all out safely]

He gently stroked her sleeping forehead, and suppressed his feeling that wanted to touch her more. A gust of wind had blown into the room, while he sat silently in the chair at her bedside.

That portion of the limited time he had, the meager, precious time that he needed to conserve, he gave it all to her. At this point, this was the best that Subaru could do to offer her his heart.

For how long had time passed in this stillness.

Suddenly, Subaru's consciousness that was vacantly staring at Rem in a daze was pulled back to reality by the sound of a knock on the door. Lifting his face, and turning to the door, [Yes], he answered, and,

[????: Apologies for the intrusion. ——I am glad you've returned safely, Subaru-sama]

Quietly pushing open the door, a tall woman entered the room.

With her golden hair swaying, and her posture impeccable and refined—— it was

Frederica.

Seeing Subaru at the sleeping Rem's side, she slightly lowered her head, and,
[Frederica: There are a variety of questions I wish to ask you..... and I am sure Subaru-sama feels the same. Let us change the location. Although she is asleep, I doubt these are things that she would especially like to hear]

[Subaru: That sure helped speed things along.The things I want to ask you, do you already have some idea what they are?]

[Frederica: Possibly]

Hearing that modest response, Subaru spilled out a small sigh and stood up from his chair. He touched Rem's sleeping cheeks one last time, and, as if to sever his reluctance, he clenched tight his fist,

[Subaru: Your rowdy, foul-mouthed little brother, that Gap-Moe who looks like a Loli but is a Granny on the inside. The Sanctuary that is the Experimental Grounds, and Roswaal's true intentions. Let me look forward to seeing how much of that you can answer]

[Frederica: Since the Master hasn't returned, it would seem that the Trials haven't ended yet?]

After leaving Rem's bedroom, the two of them moved to the drawing room.

Placing a steaming cup of amber-colored tea in front of Subaru, Frederica sat down across from him and opened with these words. Receiving the cup, Subaru nodded [Yeah] as he stirred his tea with a spoon,

[Subaru: You sure got straight to the point. ——So, don't you feel a little guilty about knowing all that inside information and yet giving us so little when you sent us off?]

[Frederica: I won't make excuses. After all, it is true that I did not tell you everything about the Sanctuary and the Trials and that no-good little brother of mine]

Frederica's detached tone did not seem to be carrying any sense of guilt about that fact. However, he couldn't say for certain that she was entirely without remorse. Perhaps, she was merely suppressing such feelings and pretending to be without emotions so as not to reveal the contents of her heart.

It was the same with Ram—— but considering the lengths of time he had gotten to know them, it was far more difficult to tell with Frederica.

[Subaru: As I said back in the room, there're all sorts of things I want to ask you..... Can I expect to get answers to all of them?]

[Frederica:I don't imagine I would be able to meet such expectations. Since the Sanctuary is not yet liberated, I am still bound by my contract to the Master. As long as I must abide by that contract, there is a limit to what facts I can convey to Subaru-sama]

[Subaru: Contracts again..... it's the same with everybody here]

Subaru pressed a hand to his forehead and felt an especially bitter sense of disappointment.

As much as he wanted to raise his voice and scream that contracts could be interpreted more freely, when he remembered his promise to Emilia, he realized he couldn't bring himself to force anyone else to break theirs.

[Subaru: What if I were to ask you about the details of your contract?]

[Frederica: I'm sorry. As long as the contract exists between Roswaal-sama and myself, the information I can reveal is limited. ——I'm afraid that is all I could say on that subject]

[Subaru: There's no new information at all. Damn it, that asshole always has to do these baffling things. Looks like this time I'll have no choice but to treat him as an enemy from now on]

Clicking his tongue at the culprit responsible for this disappointing reality, Subaru tried to pull himself together by taking a sip of his tea. He could still only taste leaves, but after

drinking them over and over, Subaru could already distinguish the expensive leaves from those that are not. ——And his tongue told him that these were expensive leaves.

[Subaru: This may not be the right occasion, but..... Frederica, you originally came from the Sanctuary, and you're Garfiel's older sister, right? Or you can't even tell me that much?]

[Frederica: No, that is not a problem. What you said is..... correct. Although, more accurately, I am not from the Sanctuary, but only grew up there. However, since I have lived in the Sanctuary from as early as I could remember, it would not be incorrect to put it that way]

[Subaru: Not from the Sanctuary..... that's what Lewes-san said as well. Sounds like Roswaal likes to bring half-bloods to live there, huh?]

In the dragon carriage on the road home, Lewes, who tagged along, had mentioned this. Back then, because of Lewes' refusal, he didn't manage to get to the true intentions behind Roswaal's actions, but,

[Subaru: Half-bloods can't pass through the Barrier, so bringing them in is basically the same as imprisoning them there, isn't it? Then why would he do such a thing..... and the people there, despite knowing that they're being imprisoned, they.....]

They didn't seem to be particularly upset and instead appeared to be living peaceful lives there.

At least, they didn't seem to be people who had been forcefully dragged in and trapped, nor were there any signs of outrage at their treatment in the course of their daily lives. In other words, it was as though they had accepted their lives within the Sanctuary. ——Could there be some significance to that?

[Frederica: Subaru-sama, do you know about the Demihuman War?]

[Subaru:Demihuman War. If it's just the word, I feel like I've heard it somewhere before]

If he sieved through his memories to the very beginning, he must have heard that word two or three times before. Subaru remembered being struck with the impression that that name more or less conveyed the basics of what had occurred.

Hearing Subaru's vague answer, Federica gently brushed her fingers through her golden hair, before lightly covering her razor-sharp fangs that were peeking through the corner of her lips,

[Federica: If you wish to unravel the purpose of the Sanctuary's existence and Roswaal-sama's considerations, we would first have to talk a bit about the Demihuman War]

Saying this, she stood up and walked to the back of the drawing room. Sensing Subaru's gaze trailing behind her, Federica picked up a box from the table in the back of the room, and,

[Federica: Don't be so alarmed, I am merely getting some confectionaries]

Revealing a slight smile on the corners of her lips, she returned and set down the box in front of Subaru.

Laid out inside, were assorted sweets unique to this world which he had only tasted on extremely rare occasions in Roswaal's Mansion.

While Subaru looked back and forth between the treats and the face of the girl who presented them,

[Federica: Since it will be a long and tiresome story, please enjoy, and bear with me]



Re:ゼロ
から始める異世界生活

Chapter 32 [1/4]

Tilting the steaming teacup to his lips and taking a sip, Subaru opened his ears to Frederica's words.

[Frederica: The Demihuman War—— To begin with, would Subaru-sama know what kind of dispute this was?]

[Subaru: Like I said, I don't know the details. Just..... I can kinda imagine what might've happened just from the name and the historical background]

[Frederica: My, that's interesting. May I ask what you imagined it to be?]

Hearing this reply from Subaru, Frederica covered the corner of her lips and smiled. Covering her mouthful of fangs while smiling seemed to be a deeply ingrained habit of her's, and Subaru often saw her this way.

It would seem that although she loved to smile, she didn't want others to see it. Closing his eyes and scratching at his cheeks, with [Right], Subaru began,

[Subaru: I don't know how long ago that war took place, but I can imagine it couldn't have had nothing to do with the Witch of Envy. I've seen how Emilia was treated like a tumor in the Capital, and I know that Half-Elves are despised by all sorts of people]

Recorded even in picture-books, the Witch of Envy was universally known as the unparalleled symbol of absolute evil. Being a silver-haired Half-Elf, for having only this one point in common with the Witch, Emilia was treated with this unjust prejudice. So, in the wake of the Witch of Envy—— Subaru could imagine the kind of conflict that might have arisen from even the most insignificant details.

[Subaru: A Half-Elf, would be a child between a Human and an Elf, right? Carrying on from their hatred of Half-Elves..... it's not too far-fetched that some would believe that Half-Bloods born between humans and other races are also heresy deserving of persecution]

[Frederica:Please, do go on]

[Subaru: I'm just pulling this from imagination, but since the persecution of Half-Elves led to the persecution of Half-Bloods by association, if we take this to the extreme, the very existence of the Demihumans who begot the Half-Bloods would also be a threat as well..... that's probably what some of those guys are thinking]

To the extent of Subaru's knowledge, the humans are by far the most numerous race in this world. He knew of the existence of Elves, and Beastmen like Anastasia's triplets, but just based on his observations over the days he spent at the Capital, the absolute number of Demihumans were indeed far fewer than the humans.

And so, solely owing to their majority, they came to believe that they had justice on their side.

[Subaru: I doubt absolutely everyone would've taken up this way of thinking, but the loud and obnoxious types are probably the same anywhere. So, compared to hatred of Demihumans..... it's probably closer to fear, isn't it. And when that frustration eventually boils over...]

[Frederica: The tension between Humans and Demihumans erupted. The smoldering kindling caught fire, and with ever-gathering momentum, its flames engulfed the whole of Lugnica]

Spilling this in a melancholic voice, Frederica continued on from Subaru's words.

Closing one of his eyes, Subaru gazed at her downcast expression. And Frederica, with a single nod, turned up her face.

[Frederica: There is almost no need to supplement your conjectures, nor are there any grounds for dispute.Have you truly never heard any detailed accounts of the war?]

[Subaru: Nah. If that was essentially correct, it's just thanks to my power of imagination. Or reading experience..... this kind of stuff shows up in light novels a lot, you know, antagonism between races and stuff]

Although, of course, Subaru never actually paid much mind to these problems in reality. Even in his Original World, so-called racial discrimination existed. But, to Subaru, they might as well have been taking place a world away. Like problems existing in some Parallel World.

He was himself, and the others were others, he had held this coldly apathetic outlook. And while this was true in a way, in reality, he was only averting his eyes.

[Subaru: It's just, even if I can imagine how things got the way they are, I'd still have no idea how to fix it. But since you're saying this in the past-tense, at least that means the Demihuman War had already run its course, right?]

[Frederica: In a sense, yes. But the scars of the war run deep, and the sprouts of prejudice against the offsprings between Humans and Demihumans remain deeply rooted even now]

Perhaps because she herself was born as a target of such prejudice, Frederica's words carried a certain heaviness that could not have been understood by someone merely listening from the outside.

Subaru wanted to ask what happened next, but hesitated before he could throw these words at her. And, sensing this on his mind, Frederica sighed,

[Frederica: My apologies for making you worried. Let us continue the story]

[Subaru: I kinda wanna say "don't force yourself", but these things directly tie into what I need to ask so I can't really say that. So, do force yourself, please]

[Frederica: My my. You certainly are adept at spurring people on, Subaru-sama]

Favorably interpreting Subaru's rather selfish remark, Frederica lifted her own cup and let a sip roll over her tongue,

[Frederica: The Demihuman War began approximately fifty years ago. From there, it went on for nearly ten years..... and it was recorded to have concluded forty years ago]

[Subaru: Ten years..... that's a long time. Although, back home, I think we've got a Hundred Years' War and a Thirty Years' War or something in our history as well]

Subaru wasn't so well read when it came to historical novels, so his knowledge of these events didn't go past glancing over their names in textbooks. But, with names like that, he could more or less guess how long those wars lasted at least.

Thirty years, and a hundred years. It's a frightening thought, how anyone could hate another person enough to carry on a war for so long.

Even Subaru had only spent about two months in the Parallel world.

[Subaru: That's just way too exhausting, who can keep on playing Bokusuka Wars for more than ten years?]

[Frederica: Regardless, the war first originated from a dispute between the humans and a Demihuman settlement. Originally, it would only have been a local dispute contained within a small area..... but because of the incident that followed, in a single stroke, the heat of war flared up. And the horrific conflict, in which blood upon blood washed over every corner of the land, began]

[Subaru: The incident that followed?]

[Frederica: Not long after conflict first broke out, the King of Lugnica at the time saw the seriousness of the situation and dispatched his close attendant as an envoy for peace. On the Demihuman side, the chiefs of various races gathered to welcome the envoy and to negotiate for a resolution, but.....]

Hearing Frederica's words trail off, Subaru silently tilted his head, prompting her to continue. Seeing his gesture, Frederica closed her eyes,

[Frederica: Those who attended that conference—— the envoys from the Palace and the Demihuman chiefs alike, were all indiscriminately slaughtered on the spot]

[Subaru: Indiscriminately slaughtered.....? But by who, and for what?]

[Frederica: The culprit remains unknown even to this day. But, at the time, both the Humans and the Demihumans were convinced that the other was responsible. And consequently, a small ember became a great devouring fire, and would not be put out for all ten years..... as it so happened]

[Subaru: What were they doing? If they just properly talked it through..... but that's too idealistic, isn't it]

Given the emotions of the people at the time, this might be too much of a god-like perspective to take.

The envoy dispatched by the Palace was the King's personal attendant. Considering the prestige of the envoy murdered at the scene of negotiation, to withdraw the matter without bringing the culprit to justice would have been beneath the dignity of a Kingdom. And, from the Demihumans' perspective, the fact was that their chiefs had been gathered in one place and massacred. Although it'd be demeaning to count lives this way, in purely numerical terms, the Demihuman side lost more.

Adding to that, was the existence of the Witch of Envy that first laid the foundations of the strife between their races.

It would be difficult enough to even begin to mend their relations, and in this standstill, there was no time to deal with the problems that followed—— further and further behind, unable to stem the tide, it wouldn't be hard to imagine how this invited the tragedy that resulted.

[Frederica: In the end—— the Demihuman War concluded with the surrender of the Demihumans. Even then, the Demihumans refused to take responsibility for the massacre at the conference, and only acknowledged that it would be senseless to continue the war any further]

[Subaru: Personally, stuck in this kind of quagmire, I think the side that stepped back first was actually the smarter one. Also, this was like a civil war, wasn't it? There's no benefit to the country at all]

[Frederica: The truth was precisely that. Lugnica's power greatly declined over the course of the Demihuman War. It was fortunate that at the time, all the neighboring nations were also dealing with turmoil of their own, otherwise, Lugnica may very well have been replaced by some other kingdom]

It must have been fortune in midst of misfortune that the other three nations were also occupied with internal strife, thus narrowly saving Lugnica from a final deathblow. Yet, a crisis no less perilous than that era was facing this Kingdom even now.

[Subaru: But, well, it's still pretty amazing that they managed to put an end to a war that lasted so long. It must've taken a whole lot of courage, and the resistance from the hardliners couldn't have been easy to overcome]

[Frederica:It was because humanity had one overwhelming presence among them who bent the pro-war faction's will. For it was to the unrivaled swordsmanship of the then-Current Generation Sword Saint, Thearesia Van Astrea-sama, that all the Demihumans bowed their heads..... is something the matter?]

[Subaru: No, I was just surprised to hear a name that I know... It's a small world]

Having heard that name before, Subaru remembered that Wilhelm's wife was named Thearesia.

The Sword Saint of that era, she must have been the Generation before Reinhard.

Hearing that a single woman had put an end to a war that had raged on for ten years, Subaru felt a true sense of the unorthodoxy of the existence that was the Sword Saint.

[Subaru: Well, I have a general idea how the Demihuman War went now. And I can more or less imagine the kind of problems might've sprung up from it]

[Frederica: The reality was almost exactly as Subaru-sama surmised. It would seem that your mind is sharper than I thought. I'm surprised to find that I've misjudged you]

[Subaru: I'll just... pretend that was a compliment for now. So, moving along, although the Demihuman War has ended, the prejudice against the Demihumans couldn't have been dispelled so easily. Of course, people wouldn't blatantly flaunt their hostility under the public eye, but]

Even in the Capital, along the streets lined by fruit-stalls, Humans and Demihumans seemed to be living in normal, peaceful coexistence. But who knows how much pain and struggle had to pass before such a scene could become part of normal life. And, contrary to places like these, there must also have been places where peace had not become normal occurrence, and there will always be places where light does not reach.

[Subaru: Places like closed-off villages with small populations, isolated from the outside world..... if one guy stands out as a problem, I get the feeling the whole place would set on him]

[Frederica: You could say that my little brother and I had lived through precisely this kind of environment]

Furrowing her brows at some painful reminiscences, for the first time in this conversation, Frederica directly referred to her little brother—— Garfiel. Then, turning her eyes somewhere far away,

[Frederica: My brother is my sibling by a different father. Our surnames are different because of this..... I took my father's surname, while my little brother took the surname of our mother]

[Subaru: Your full name is Frederica..... Baumann, right?]

[Frederica: Yes. And my brother's last name would be Tinsel. Our mother was a..... clumsy person, and also an unlucky person]

It was as if Frederica tried to find the right word, but failed to find it in the end. Hearing her say this, Subaru showed an expression of non-understanding, when she started again with [It's embarrassing to say this, but]

[Frederica: It seems, our mother was in the process of being sold off because of her debt, when the slavers were set upon by a group of Demihuman bandits and she was captured..... That's where she met my father]

[Subaru: Wha!? Wa-wai-wait! I get the feeling I have to prepare my heart before I can hear this!]

[Frederica: But that father died soon after, and my mother carried me as an infant as she wandered without a home, when she was captured by another Demihuman band. That's where she met Garfiel's father.....]

[Subaru: Waitwaitwait, I was wrong! I never thought it was going to get this heavy!]

[Frederica: And so, I won't dwell on these things. In any case, Garfiel was born, but once again, we were unable to stay with Garfiel's father. So our mother, carrying the two of us, wandered once more, and, when we were at the end of our ropes, we were taken in by the House of Mathers]

Briefly laying bare her heavy past, a certain nostalgia emerged in Frederica's eyes as she sighed. Then, stroking the handle of her chair with a palm,

[Frederica: At the time, still in his early teens, the Master..... Roswaal-sama, had already inherited his title as the head of the House of Mathers. To my brother and I, the Master is our savior in the truest sense of the word. And I consider it to be an honor to be able to serve at his side this way]

[Subaru: So the two of you were brought into the Sanctuary, and lived there, huh..... by the way, it's a bit hard to bring this up but, what happened to your mother?]

From what he could gather from her story so far, their mother must have been a pure blooded Human. Which meant that she would have been able to enter and exit the Sanctuary at will. But whether it was at the Sanctuary or the Mansion, Subaru had never seen anyone who could have been her.

Yet just as Subaru was imagining the worst, Frederica shook her head,

[Frederica: It seems I've made you worried, but please rest assured. After leaving my brother and I with Roswaal-sama, our mother left the Mansion without leaving word of where she was going. Nor have we heard from her since. But she must be safe and still living somewhere, I believe]

[Subaru: ————]

Listening to Frederica lightly saying this, Subaru couldn't utter another word and only remained in silence. Although the worst Subaru had prepared for was their being separated by death, the crueller reality was that she had abandoned them.

But hearing this created even more questions,

[Subaru: Even though your mother left like this, Garfiel is still using her surname, while you're using your father's. Why is that?]

[Frederica: Because there were no records of her left behind, our memories of our mother were told to us by others..... and in these unreliable circumstances, I took my father's surname. As for the reason why my little brother took our mother's surname..... it was

because that child didn't know about our mother. As much as he pretends to be meaner than he is, he is stubbornly sentimental at heart]

[Subaru: Stubbornly sentimental.....]

Reviewing his impression of Garfiel in his mind, that description would explain many things.

Although he would be quicker to take action than to think things through, and despite being foul-mouthed and rude, Garfiel was nonetheless sensible and understanding. He considered himself dumb, but he was not entirely unthoughtful, nor would he act completely without reason. Everything about him was reminiscent of a juvenile-delinquent punk from the good old days.

In terms of sensibilities alone, Subaru couldn't deny that Garfiel was upstanding and noble-minded in his own way.

[Frederica: Subaru-sama. ——Would you happen to know how the Sanctuary's Barrier distinguishes its targets?]

While Subaru occupied his mind with such thoughts, Frederica threw him this rather abrupt question.

Unable to understand the meaning behind it, Subaru was a little slow to react. He looked back at Frederica without much confidence, and with [Umm],

[Subaru: Honestly, no. While there's no doubt the Barrier certainly exists, I can't feel it at all. It's probably using some kind of magic to check everyone that passes, I guess.....]

[Frederica: The Barrier does so by verifying the blood inside the veins of those who passes through. If it can clearly distinguish both Human and Demihuman blood, that person will be repelled. In essence, that is the nature of the Barrier]

[Subaru:What are you trying to say?]

Unsure why she was suddenly revealing the Barrier's conditions to him, Subaru only quietly asked her this in return. Receiving this response, Frederica lightly nodded,

[Frederica: Do you perhaps now understand how I was able to pass through the Barrier and exit the Sanctuary?]

[Subaru:I don't. I feel like I understand even less now after you told me the Barrier's conditions. On the road back, I saw Lewes-san almost collapse when she came close to the Barrier, so I'm sure the Barrier's effects are real. And it was the same when we entered the Sanctuary as well]

Right before Garfiel's dramatic introduction, Emilia had collapsed from passing through the Barrier. Having witnessed its immense power, only a fool would have any doubts about its existence——

[Subaru: ——Huh? How come.....]

That moment, a shock flashed across Subaru's mind.

On the road back home, he was accompanied by Lewes. After saying goodbye to Lewes, as they cleared the forest and passed through the Barrier, he had felt a sense of incongruity.

Now he had the answer to that unease. Subaru had already noticed this when he saw Lewes' reaction as they came close to the Barrier.

[Subaru: They were the under the same conditions..... but how come when he was that close to the Barrier, that bastard Garfiel was still fine and kicking around?]

Ambushing them as soon as they passed through the Barrier, Garfiel threw Patrasche and the dragon carriage into the air as if they were nothing.

He certainly didn't use his full strength that time, but compared to Emilia, who fainted as she passed through the Barrier, and Lewes, who almost collapsed just by going near it, Garfiel's behavior was completely different.

——It was as though his body wasn't affected by the Barrier at all.

[Frederica: Owing to his special characteristic, Atavism, at first glance, my brother might appear to have more Demihuman lineage, but in fact, that is not the case. ——The same is true with me]

[Subaru: If detection of blood is the Barrier's criteria for distinguishing humans from Half-Bloods..... to bypass this criteria, one side of the blood would just have to be too thin to detect?]

[Frederica: Although my brother and I have different fathers, neither of them were pure-blooded Demihumans. Both were Half-Blooded, and combined with our Human mother, we were born having inherited only one $\frac{1}{4}$ of Demihuman blood, having been twice diluted this way]

[Subaru: One-quarter..... so that's why you're not repulsed by the Barrier]

The Barrier that repels Half-Bloods does not repel Quarter-Bloods. It sounded almost farcical, but his existing suspicions told him that it was the truth.

On the subject of why Frederica was able to cross the Barrier, Lewes had only given the ambiguous explanation that she was an exception. But now, Subaru could understand her answer.

But then, this would give rise to next question,

[Subaru: Wait. Then does that mean Garfiel can also freely exit the Sanctuary? If he wants to, that guy can just come out regardless of whether the Trials are completed?]

If that was true, then it would be surprising and welcome news.

If he could bring him out without the Barrier blocking the way, there would now be a possibility of using his strength to repel Elsa when she attacks the Mansion.

Originally, Subaru had already abandoned his hopes of repulsing Elsa in this loop and was preparing to evacuate everyone from the Mansion, but now——

[Subaru: If that guy can come out, then.....]

[Frederica: It's true, that same as myself, my brother can also venture outside the Sanctuary. When it came time for me to leave the Sanctuary, he was supposed to have come with me, and he had come along as far as the edge of the Barrier. But.....]

Cutting off her words there, Frederica looked at Subaru, who seemed to have found some glimmer of hope. But her eyes were filled with an emotion so deep and somber that Subaru felt his hopes cool off at once. Seeing him this way, she went on,

[Frederica: My little brother chose to stay behind. And as long as the Sanctuary is not liberated, I don't think Garfiel will ever set foot outside it. He is a kind and stubbornly sentimental child]

[Subaru: Sentimental..... you don't mean...]

Seeing Subaru raise his brows as his thoughts arrived at that point, as if confirming his astonishment, Frederica gave a single nod as she covered the corner of her lips with her sleeve,

[Frederica: That child could not leave the residents of the Sanctuary behind while he ventures out alone. He is neither good, nor bad, only a straightforward..... and troublesome little brother]

Chapter 33 [The Pathway Of The Wind]

Casting down her eyes, Frederica said this of her younger brother.

Instilled within those words was something at once affectionate and terribly complicated.

Perhaps, this was only a common sentiment to have towards close family members.

[Subaru: He can physically pass through the Barrier, but he won't do it because of his mental issues..... is that essentially what you're saying?]

[Frederica: The fact is that he refused when I, his older sister, requested this of him. He had followed me all the way to the edge of the Barrier, but in the end, he chose to stay inside to be with Grandmother rather than to go with me]

[Subaru: Grandmother..... you mean Lewes-san?]

[Frederica: That child may be rude and foul-mouthed, but he genuinely adores Grandmother. As long as her long-cherished dream has not been fulfilled, he will never leave the Sanctuary]

Even though he kept calling her "Old Hag" and "Granny", Garfiel obviously held an extraordinarily deep affection toward Lewes. Subaru once called him a tsundere, and that description was quite accurate in a way.

In any case, this knowledge wouldn't help the situation very much.

[Subaru: In the end, it still doesn't change the fact that passing the Trials and liberating the Sanctuary are the key conditions. It's about as disappointing as disappointing gets]

[Frederica: I'm sorry I could not meet your expectations..... If there is anything else you wish to ask...]

[Subaru: As long as it's within your ability to answer, right?]

[Frederica: My apologies]

At Frederica's concise affirmation, Subaru sighed through his nose and lined up the questions in his mind. But, considering the flow of the conversation so far, most likely,

[Subaru: Would Roswaal's true intentions be an alright topic to ask?]

[Frederica: The Master intends to support Emilia-sama and make her the next King of Lugnica. That much I can assert without any doubt on the matter]

[Subaru: I was asking for his true intentions. I'm sure even you would agree that many of Roswaal's actions are going against what you just said?]

[Frederica: His methods are indirect and mysterious. I think neither I nor Ram would deny this]

Saying this with the implication that she and Ram had shared this opinion of Roswaal's actions between them, Frederica's face took on a pained expression.

Although she had accepted Subaru's doubts as only natural, she was nonetheless forbidden to provide him with the key to resolving them. In the end,

[Subaru: You can't tell me more without permission from Roswaal himself, huh]

[Frederica: I am truly sorry. But only know this..... the Master is Emilia-sama and Subaru-sama's ally. As long as the two of you possess the intention to prevail in the Royal Selection, that much is assured]

[Subaru: It totally bothers me how you worded that.....but it's fine. Nevermind about Roswaal for now. So far, I feel like I can trust you, Frederica. But if it ever turns out you've fallen head over heels for Roswaal like Ram, I'll have to seriously rethink our relationship]

Subaru liked Ram as an individual, but that did not mean he could place absolute trust in her. It was a complicated relationship. At least, Subaru knew that Roswaal held an unshakable, highest place in her heart, and, since Subaru cannot completely trust Roswaal, at the moment, he had no choice but to withhold his judgment of Ram as well.

[Subaru: If you can't tell me Roswaal's true intentions..... can you tell me what it means when they call the Sanctuary the Experimental Grounds? I heard Garfiel calling it that]

[Frederica: Experimental Grounds——is it]

[Subaru: Also a pile of impacted shit for those who have nowhere to go, he called it that too. After our talk about the Demihumans, I can kind of imagine the part about nowhere to go. So Roswaal has a Demihuman fetish or whatever you call that and he's gathering Half-Bloods who have nowhere to go to live there. But...]

Just the words "Experimental Grounds" gave off a sense of unease, and it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the gathered Half-Bloods had been kidnapped in a way. Who knows why Roswaal was doing this? In other words, Emilia may have allied herself with someone she shouldn't have allied with.

[Subaru: To begin with, even if it's not the Witch of Envy, if people found out his family was in charge of a facility related to a Witch, the consequences could be huge. I heard that there are no surviving records of this, but the fact is, the Tomb is still right there]

[Frederica: The meaning of the word "Witch" has since taken on an ominous connotation. Even the Master's contractual relationship with the Witch of Greed would certainly not be deemed appropriate by those around him. This concern is precisely in line with Subaru-sama's considerations, I believe]

[Subaru: I'm glad we can agree that the Sanctuary's existence is problematic. Now, wouldn't a title like the "Experimental Grounds" just make that problem even worse?]

[Frederica:.....Originally, that place was a hidden village where Half-Bloods are gathered so the Witch of Greed may conduct a certain experiment. It is unclear what negotiations took place at the time between the Witch and the owner of the land, the House of Mathers, but because of that contract, succeeding generations of the House of Mathers have managed and maintained the Sanctuary]

Nodding his head, Subaru took in the contents of Frederica's words and sorted the information in his mind. He had already gathered as much from connecting the pieces of information implied by the various people in the Sanctuary. Then, the question would be,

[Subaru: What kind of experiments was the Witch running with Half-Bloods, and why is Roswaal continuing to keep the contract even after the Witch's death.....?]

[Frederica: The reason for the latter should be simple. The contract most likely contains the clause: "Until the time of the release of the Sanctuary, to adhere to the Oath to the Witch". Unless people are periodically brought into the Sanctuary, the preconditions for the contract's fulfillment would not exist]

[Subaru: So then, he's now turning that around to create a hidden refuge for Half-Bloods? By the sound of that, one might even get the impression that Roswaal was running some kind of charity project]

Since discrimination against Half-Bloods was still a fact, it was necessary to ensure that there was a place where they could live in peace. If Roswaal was indeed fulfilling that role, then Subaru may have to revise his evaluation of him. But,

[Subaru: It doesn't seem like all of the Half-Bloods want to stay there. In fact, the ones following Lewes-san who want the Sanctuary to be liberated are in the majority, aren't they?]

[Frederica:.....The general prejudice against Demihumans has indeed greatly faded. Compared to our blood, the reason my brother and I entered the Sanctuary was more because we simply had nowhere else to live. One day, the Sanctuary will be released. —That is why, I...]

Firmly closing her eyes, Frederica cut off her words. Watching her, Subaru fell silent, and only after some time had passed, did he hesitatingly speak again,

[Subaru: I might just be imagining this.....but, was the reason why Frederica left the Sanctuary because of your concerns about what comes after the Sanctuary is released?]

[Frederica:What makes you think so?]

[Subaru: If you ask me why... your face always seems a little saddened when you talk about the Sanctuary. But you left your home in spite of this, whether it was for yourself or for others. Then...]

Scratching his cheek, Subaru saw in the back of his mind the tough facade of the golden short haired youth. Like the kindhearted girl in front of his eyes, that man was all words and wouldn't reveal his true feelings at all.

[Subaru: If you're anything like your little brother when it comes to hiding your true feelings, I wouldn't be surprised if there's some embarrassing reason behind why you left. I'm guessing you..... probably left to create some place for the people to go once the Sanctuary is liberated, somewhere they wouldn't have to be afraid, am I right? Of course, you're working here to repay your debt of gratitude to Roswaal, but that's not all, is it?That's kinda what I'm guessing]

Realizing that he was taking huge leaps of logic in his rapid-fire speculation, Subaru held back his embarrassment and stole a glance at Frederica. If she laughed it off, then it would've just been Subaru getting way ahead of himself, but,

[Frederica: When the time comes for the New World to open its doors to them.....I hope to be the one to guide them through it]

Muttering this quietly, a smile rose onto Frederica's face.

It was not a mocking smile at an outlandish guess, but a smile of a sense of liberation of having unburdened her heart to another after having seen clearly into herself.

[Frederica: I was raised by that place, but now I want to forge an environment that will foster a desire in the others to leave that place. If I can help even just a little in creating such an environment, then my..... undesired birth must have had meaning]

[Subaru: Undesired, that's...]

[Frederica: There is no need to console me. It is as it is. I cannot imagine that my mother grew heavy with me while desiring to do so. The fact is, mother abandoned my little brother and me in the Sanctuary and left. That was her answer.....but I do not wish my story to end with only that answer, and that is the reason I am here now]

It was a question to which Frederica had already reached an answer.

Having only glimpsed the surface, Subaru could not possibly affect her with his sympathy. Embracing the answer she had arrived at herself, she would face the endless choices to come with only that answer as her guide.

——“She is strong”, he sincerely thought. It was a conviction strong enough to be admired.

[Subaru:.....Does Garfiel know how you truly feel? If he knows and still didn't come with you, then...]

[Frederica: My little brother is the only person to whom I have told everything. But even so, he would not come with me.....for that was the choice he had made. Rather than leaving to procure something difficult to obtain, my little brother chose to remain to protect something easy to lose. We siblings have each chosen a separate path... the story is simply that]

[Subaru: Protect.....protect, huh. Just by his outer appearance, I'd never have guessed he was the kind of character who'd make that choice. Well, it's not like people's hearts can be understood by just looking from the outside anyway]

Rubbing his jaw, Subaru tilted his cup and drank down all the tea inside in a single gulp before holding back a hiccup. Wiping his lips with the back of his hand, he began again with [Come to think of it],

[Subaru: We seem to have wandered off-topic, so let's get back to it. About the name "Experimental Grounds". Can you talk about what kind of experiments they were running?.....Or, do you know its contents?]

[Frederica: Unfortunately, I know neither their contents nor their purpose. In fact, from the moment the Witch of Greed died, the continuation of the experiments became impossible. Only the facility remains, and the House of Mathers merely maintains it]

[Subaru: That's even more incomprehensible. I personally understand now how important it is to keep promises, but what's even the point of continuing to keep it when the other side has already been dead for 400 years?]

[Frederica: At least, if it weren't for the Master's family upholding that promise, I doubt my brother and I would have passed our childhoods in peace]

[Subaru: Ah.....that's..... I didn't think of that. Sorry]

Seeing Subaru sincerely apologizing, Frederica couldn't hold in her giggle.

Then, she emptied her cup as well and collected the finished cup from Subaru before standing up from her seat,

[Frederica: We have gone on talking for quite a long while now. Let us save the rest for another time. What do you plan to do next, Subaru-sama?]

[Subaru: I only tagged along to bring the villagers back home in the first place. Now that I've asked what I wanted to ask, I should be heading back..... That said, it would be a bit difficult to do that today, so I'll head back tomorrow morning, I guess]

[Frederica: Is that so. In that case, I imagine Petra will be in high spirits tonight and tomorrow morning. But considering how distracted she will get, it's difficult to tell whether that would be a good thing or not]

[Subaru: More than anything, it's nice to see Petra's education progressing nicely... Now, where is Petra, anyway?]

[Frederica: Right now, I believe she would be back in the village greeting everyone that's returned. I instructed her to do so]

As expected, Frederica must have seen through her intentions before she even asked. Watching her back as she carried off the clattering teacups, Subaru stood up from his chair as well, and counted on his fingers all the remaining things he had to do. What he managed to hear from Frederica had been only half of what he wanted to hear. But even so, it had given him enough to move forward with his speculations. All that was left now, was to find the final person who might still know more. [Subaru: It'll probably take a while, but it's time to try combing through this Mansion for now.....]

At the thought of the heavy labor ahead of him, Subaru slumped his shoulders. Catching a brief glimpse of Subaru's back as she left the room, Frederica whispered in a quiet voice, [Frederica: I know neither their contents nor their purpose..... but, I do know the result of the Experimental Grounds. When you find out, when you come to understand..... what would you think then, I wonder?]

But the contents of her whisper did not reach Subaru, who was now deep in thought.

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Everyone in the Mansion knew that Beatrice's "Door Crossing" was a pain to deal with, but Subaru only truly got a sense of this after returning from the Capital.

His natural intuitive ability to pick from a multitude of choices—— or, more accurately, his ability to go with his gut, was one of the few things about himself that Subaru was rather proud of.

Subaru's special characteristic of managing to select the right option without any hints and for no particular reason was, in a way, just as annoying as his other special characteristic "Can't read the mood," and had made no small contribution to his chances of encountering Beatrice.

Ever since coming back from the Capital, that intuition hadn't been working properly.

[Subaru: That's odd. That should've been every door in the Mansion.....]

That was the last one. Closing the final bathroom door where he had placed all his hopes, Subaru expressed his disappointment at the result by tilting his head with a sigh.

Since returning from the Capital, he had just been consistently failing at the "Guess where Beako is" quiz. Considering how his hit-rate was almost 100% before, he couldn't exactly blame this on a bad streak. At this point, Subaru had to admit that there was nothing else he could do.

[Subaru: Gees, she must be seriously trying to avoid me]

If Beatrice really put her mind to it, no one could bypass her "Door Crossing," Ram once told him this. Yet somehow, Subaru had always managed to defy this common sense. And after a while, Subaru had developed a sense of superiority over Beatrice—— In this case, it was not so much that he was able to bypass her "Door Crossing," but that he had a greater advantage over Beatrice than anyone else in the Mansion.

[Subaru: Even though we parted ways like that, I didn't think you'd go full-Hikikomori because of it..... If you won't even show me your face, I can't bicker or apologize or anything]

Subaru had no idea what he might've said that would make her so adamantly refuse to see him. He had no idea, and if he continued being physically cut off like this, he would go

on having no idea. And he hated that.

Regardless of what he wanted to learn from her, and regardless of all the pressing issues tying him down, all Subaru wanted now was to see her and talk to her.

It'd be alright even if it meant getting scolded, or being looked down upon like a small idiot. But those carefree days are lost. And, only now realizing this, Subaru found he couldn't bear it at all. Although he knew this was a selfish thought.

[Subaru: Puck and Beako, they won't even let out a peep when it comes down to the critical moment]

Whether it was Puck, still hiding out somewhere, or Beatrice, withdrawing into her own space, they both went missing when Emilia and Subaru needed them most.

Can't be counted on at all when there's trouble, they were almost as bad as the Kamisamas up in the sky.

But the situation was far too urgent to be soaking in hurt feelings. Knowing that Elsa was closing in on the Mansion, but having no means of repelling her, his highest priority now was to evacuate everyone in the Mansion.

No matter how he thought about it, Elsa probably had no reason to extend her murdering blades to the unrelated Arlam village. So protecting the lives of those in the Mansion was the most important task at hand.

Bringing Rem and Petra out wouldn't be difficult. If he appealed to Frederica's sense of professionalism, he should be able to persuade her. The problem was Beatrice who wouldn't see him.

Before, in the loops starting inside the Capital, Subaru had already failed to get her to leave the Mansion. That time, he gave up trying to convince her to abandon the Mansion because he knew that the Witch Cult's target wasn't the Mansion.

But this time was different. Elsa will be invading the Mansion, and will not hesitate to put everyone to the blade. Even if her target, Emilia, was missing, she would probably set her mind to opening every bowel in the Mansion.

Although he had no idea what Beatrice's actual combat strength was, Elsa had been able to hold her own in a pitched battle against the strength of Puck and Emilia combined, and Subaru imagined that she might even be able to match the strength of Wilhelm.

If Beatrice and Elsa ever came into direct contact, Subaru couldn't envision Beatrice winning against her.

[Subaru: Maybe I'm just being way too over-cautious when it comes to Elsa.....But after getting killed by someone three times it should be pretty natural to feel this way. ——Oh]

Rubbing at the phantom pain in his stomach while walking along the hallway, Subaru's legs suddenly stopped. His eyes were fixed on a conspicuously expensive-looking door, to the room at the center of the uppermost floor of the Mansion—— Roswaal's office.

Subaru was aware that it'd be bad manners to set foot into the Master's room while the Master was away, but,

[Subaru: Right, there was something in this room that I needed to check out]

Saying this, he opened the door and entered without much pomp.

Naturally, the scene that opened before him as he stepped into the office was no different from when he was opening every door in the Mansion. Since Roswaal himself hadn't returned, the room still maintained the same orderliness from the time Subaru made Otto organize it.

The original mess of documents and bookshelves had all been neatly arranged by Otto, and there was now a pristine impression to the room as if it had just been thoroughly cleaned. Subaru looked it over before walking to the back of the room, where two bookshelves stood side by side beside the ebony desk.

[Subaru: Behind this bookshelf... is a hidden passage, huh]

Twice, he had already confirmed the existence of this hidden passage—— it was probably serving as an escape path in case of emergencies, but as for how to activate it and where the passageway led to, these were all unknown to Subaru.

[Subaru: It was activated when Elsa attacked, so I think it definitely lets you escape somewhere..... although the last time I went in I froze to death]

That memory ended as he was frozen into an ice sculpture alongside the Witch Cultists who had gotten on the wrong side of Puck. He remembered his fingers breaking off and his limbs shattering, and dying almost painlessly, but so much about it was hazy that recalling it did not bring him anything more than a shudder. But death was still death. He had no intention of taking it lightly. In any case,

[Subaru: Unless I find out where this escape route leads, I won't know what to do if worse comes to worst. It might even come out somewhere in the Mansion..... Though I'm guessing that's probably not the case]

If ensuring safety was the highest priority, confirming the escape route would be an indispensable step. Most likely, it led somewhere into the mountains behind the Mansion. And, considering how escape tunnels usually work, if there are some emergency provisions on the way that'd be even better.

[Subaru: Just to be sure, I'll take a quick look..... but, as much as I want to...]

Where's the gimmick that activates this thing, anyway?

In the meantime, he tried dragging on the bookshelf with all his might to get it to move, but the solidly packed bookshelf wouldn't budge at all from the strength of Subaru's arm. Maybe if he took out all the books and left just the shelf he might be able to move it a little then, but,

[Subaru: No way there's time for that in a real emergency... there must be a switch to activate it somewhere]

On that thought, Subaru started fishing into the back of the bookshelves, but didn't find any secret mechanisms. Although, when Subaru pulled out the second-to-last drawer, he was stunned for a second by the hoard of gemstones stuffed inside.

[Subaru: Time to give up, huh..... unless, maybe it's not even in the room?]

[???: What's not in the room?]

[Subaru: Well naturally, it'd be a hidden switch-thingey or something. I wanna see the hidden passage on the other side of the bookshelves but there's no way to do that unless I find it]

[???: Oh, the escape path. That's this statue here]

Petra tugged on the downcast Subaru's sleeves, and Subaru, looking towards the direction she was pointing at, nodded his head up and down with [Ehhhh],

[Subaru: Placed in the corner of the room, looks like nothing but a normal statue..... could this be the gimmick?]

It was a little statue of a person seated in a chair, small enough to be placed on a table. To see something like this in an otherwise unadorned room was indeed somewhat peculiar, but Petra bravely walked up to it without any signs of fear, and,

“Tykh”

With a small sound, the statue's head twisted.

Like it was going to be detached, the statue's head turned a hundred and eighty degrees. Watching the man's neckbone being brutally snapped, Subaru winced his brows. And, the next moment,

“Ooo, ooo, ooo——”

The sound of a heavy object sliding across the floor reverberated throughout the room. Turning around, Subaru saw the bookshelves parting, revealing a pitch black entrance wide enough for a single person to pass through.

Seeing the mission-objective escape path making its appearance at last, Subaru lightly balled up his fists and struck out a victory pose.

[Subaru: That's it that's it that's it! That's what I'm looking for! I'm saved!]

[Petra: Huhuu~, I helped, didn't I~. Big-sister-sama Frederica told me about this before, it's an escape path in case of emergencies, told me to remember it and all]

[Subaru: Oho, thank you thank you. Now I'll just..... Petra, when did you get here!?!]

[Petra: You just noticed now!?!]

Petra blended into the flow of things so perfectly that it took a while before the contemplative Subaru noticed that she was there. At Subaru's unacceptable response, Petra pouted up her lips,

[Petra: After I ran all the way back, and even helped you out.....Subaru-sama, I think that was kinda mean]

[Subaru: No no, I only noticed halfway through that I was talking with someone when I'm supposed to be alone. And then I was too excited to see the OBJECTIVE COMPLETE and that's why I was a bit late to notice you. Sorrysorry]

The little girl turned her face away as if stating that she was still angry, and Subaru lightly patted her head while apologizing. Then, turning his eyes to the escape passage again,

[Subaru: By the way, Petra, did Frederica ever tell you where this thing leads?]

[Petra: Yep. Big-sister-sama Frederica said it leads to a small cabin in the mountains in the back. There's another barrier there that's different from the Boundaries against the Mabeasts, so it can't be found from the outside]

[Subaru: I see. So it's a hidden passage after all. But I better go check it out with my own eyes]

Then it was confirmed that the passageway came out in the mountains, but that would also mean that the tunnel could serve as both an escape route and an invasion route.

Subaru rolled up his sleeves, and, pumping himself full of spirit, stepped towards the entrance. And Petra's quiet footsteps followed behind him.

[Subaru: Oh, you're coming too, Petra?]

[Petra: Can't I?]

[Subaru: It's not that you can't, but there's probably not going to be anything interesting, you know. I'm only going in since I'm curious where it leads to, and after that I'll be coming right back]

[Petra: It's my break time right now, so I'm free to do what I want. So you won't mind if I come?]

Tugging on the hems of his shirt, Petra looked up at Subaru with puppy-like eyes. Not having the heart to leave her behind like this, Subaru sighed and gave out a wry smile, and,

[Subaru: We really are just going there and coming right back, you know. You sure are curious, Petra]

[Petra: If I wasn't curious I wouldn't be here, so..... I'm glad I'm curious]

Hearing Petra's reply, he wasn't really sure what she was trying to say. Nonetheless, smoothing it over with a smile, Subaru took her outstretched hand and stepped into the passageway.

The dark hidden-passage gave way to a spiraling staircase, while the materials of the walls themselves glowed with a pale blue light. Although they wouldn't be losing sight of the path downstairs, seeing that the tunnel was leading underground, Subaru looked back, [Subaru: This stairway is pretty long and dark, be careful not to slip]

[Petra: If I slip will you save me?]

[Subaru: I'll have to hug you while tumbling all the way down the stairs, you know..... if I end up in a coma and can never walk again that'll be a way too miserable sight]

[Petra: If that happens, I'll take care of Subaru-sama for the rest of your whole life]

[Subaru: I'm glad, but the process is way too terrifying!]

With this exchange, Subaru took the lead as the two of them began heading down the stairs. A cold wind swept up from below, sending thoughts of a non-existent Puck into Subaru's mind as a chill ran up his spine.

It was not that he was afraid of the non-existent future of a frozen death, but,

[Subaru: It's no fun being so quiet while going down, and Petra might be getting scared, so let's talk about something]

[Petra: Subaru-sama, you know your palm is getting kind of sweaty?]

[Subaru: Petra must be getting scared so let's talk about something! How was everyone at the village!?!]

Seeing Subaru intent on sticking to the concerned-for-a-little-girl narrative, Petra cast him a compassionate gaze and went along with it. And so, carrying on the miscellaneous conversation this way to keep the silence at bay, they continued down the stairs for several more minutes——when the staircase ended, and they arrived at the familiar narrow passage.

Further down the passage, there will be a door, and beyond that door would be an un-experienced zone to Subaru.

[Subaru: Just by the feels of it, we should still be right underneath the Mansion. If this path leads all the way to the back mountains, it must be a quite a long tunnel]

[Petra: Escape route, escape path, tunnel, can't we call it one thing?]

[Subaru: You're right... Then, since the wind might as well be coming all the way from Mexico, let's call it SANTUNNEL]

[Petra: Ah, careful don't trip, there's a bump there]

Just like this, Petra beautifully ignored Subaru's random comment. Seeing her Anti-Subaru capabilities improve so much in such a short period of time, Subaru felt both pleased and a little lonely.

Maintaining this nostalgic sentiment as they continued through the passageway, they soon arrived at a slightly wider area. Straight ahead, a door emerged out of the darkness, confirming that this was the room. Back then, it was here that the frozen figures of the Witch Cultists lined up in this claustrophobic space, but naturally, there was no trace of that this time. Confirming this, Subaru spilled a quiet sigh of relief.

[Subaru: This should go without saying, but, it's good that no TRAUMA SWITCHES got triggered, huh. Anyways, so far we should be about a third of the way to the mountain cabin, right?]

[Petra: The wind's so cold..... it must be from the other side of the door]

While Subaru was busy feeling relieved, beside him, Petra was eagerly waiting with anticipation for the NEW STAGE on the opposite side of the door. With [Yeah], Subaru nodded in agreement,

[Subaru: Last time I touched the door I got an instant GAME OVER. So everything after that point is still completely unknown..... well, guess we'll make it up as we go]

Having made up this resolve, Subaru unceremoniously placed his hand on the door. And then, pushing it open, he felt an icy wind washing over his face, flooding into the small room——

[Subaru: ——ah?]

Simultaneous with that quiet sound, Subaru noticed that something had struck his belly. Looking down, he stared at the left side of his waist that had taken the impact. Some kind of skewer was sticking out of it, and to prove that this had happened recently, the butt-end of it was still quivering.

——Watching, as little by little blood seeped into his clothes, Subaru's throat froze.

[Petra: Yyaa——h!?!]

In place of the choked-up Subaru, Petra, who noticed the same wound, shrieked at the top of her voice. Its high-pitched sound echoed through the corridor, lashing upon Subaru's eardrums.

In the instant the pain caught up, still not understanding what had happened, Subaru's mind swam with all its might, trying to think of something to do.

Petra's shriek trailed off. The echoing corridor was deprived of sound, until only *her* noise could be heard. In a world where he should not be hearing anything, Subaru heard that sound.

Of footsteps, and a knife being pulled out of its sheath——

[Elsa: Now, let's fulfill that promise——]

Licking her lips with a red tongue, it was the voice of a murdering monster trembling at the premonition of slaughter.

Chapter 34 [The World That Was Ending]

He sensed the portents of incoming pain.

It was an unpleasant sensation, but ever since coming to this world, there had been no shortage of life-threatening injuries in his life. That sensation told him: these next few seconds will decide victory or defeat.

While Petra's shriek echoed down the narrow passage, Subaru reached out his hand towards the two skewer-like things sticking out of the left side of his waist. He knew that the instant he touches them, it will begin. And so, before that, Subaru forced his mind to turn at an incredible rate.

Two darts, not fatal wounds. There were still a few seconds before the pain catches up. Petra was frozen in place. Where did the attack come from? His hand was still touching the door. The high-pitched echo went on. And, in its midst, a murderous voice had snuck into Subaru's ears.

——Elsa's.

Before his eyes, he saw a shadow lurking in the unlighted void. Its posture was low, almost crawling, as if poisoning itself to strike. It was Elsa.

The projectile that skewered him through the waist was thrown from the other end of the passage. That disgustingly accurate control, aimed directly at the bowels as a matter of doctrine. He almost wanted to applaud.

A stupid thought, a frivolous idea. Why was Elsa here now? There was supposed to be a grace period. Why was she hiding in a hidden passage that no one was supposed to know about? And how did she know? All that can wait. Questions can come later. At this moment just focus on survival and force all brain cells to fire——!

[Subaru: ——SHAMAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAC!!]

No weapons, no means to intercept, horrendously unprepared and unready.

Faced with this split-second situation, there was only one thing Subaru could do——or rather, he had already decided in his heart that he would take that one action the moment he encountered Elsa, regardless of appearances.

Answering Subaru's call, his damaged Gate rallied his body's Mana at his chant. Black smoke spouted out from the tip of Subaru's extended right hand—— covering the passage in darkness.

A pitch-blackness darker than light-given shadows engulfed the narrow space, instantly dividing Subaru and the immediate threat before him. The expelled smoke had no effect of restricting actual movement. Charge forward, and it will give way like brittle mist. But, [Subaru: WALL OF INCOMPREHENSION, IF YOU THINK YOU CAN SCALE IT I'D LIKE TO SEE YOU TR——Gaaaaaagghhhh!!]

Before he could finish his taunt, the delayed attack of excruciating pain assaulted Subaru. Beginning with his left hip, the searing heat coursed throughout his body, and his scream sounded out as though the roots of his brain and his lower waist were being pierced by red-hot spits. On top of this were the consequences of spellcasting in his damaged state. Drawing more Mana than his body could afford, he felt the strength of his body sucked dry, and, overcome with exhaustion and fatigue, he fell to his knees. Yet, it was then that something pulled him from the verge of collapse, [Petra: Subaru——!]

A small and soft sensation was gripping onto his lifeless hand. He looked, and saw Petra worrying over him, her long lashes trembling and on the brink of tears.

Within her eyes, was fear of circumstances that were beyond her comprehension, as well as rejection of the existence of the preposterous threat closing in before her. But most of all, they held the deep colors of worry for Subaru's safety.

The moment he recognized it, the wrenching pain of his mangled nerves and the soul-rending sense of loss were all forgotten in an instant. And before that effect could fade, he squeezed back on Petra's hand.

[Subaru: Anyways, let's go up——!]

Since they couldn't go forward, their only escape was to go back the same way they came. Even Subaru himself wasn't sure how long Shamac would last. So far, the only improvement was that his body didn't faint after blowing out all his Mana since his body must have grown accustomed after so many uses.

Regardless, he mustn't allow the opportunity granted by the cover of the black mist to slip away——

[Subaru: Gukh..... aagahhh!?!]

The moment he stepped forward to run, again he was struck by the pain of something sharp gouging into his flesh.

Turning his eyes to the source of the pain, he found four more metal darts nailed into his back from his right shoulder to the base of his neck. Fortunately, the piercing wounds weren't deep, but the pain of having multiple darts as thick as his pinky fingers burrowed into his flesh was only intensified by the sight.

[Subaru: She can see.....!?!]

She could see through Shamac's smoke? For an instant, Subaru thought this, but he immediately realized that could not be so. Then, intuitively, he understood what Elsa must have done from the other side of the fog.

Having judged the black smoke to be a threat and deciding that diving in would be dangerous, Elsa had blindly thrown her darts through the mist without aiming at anything in particular.

The passage was narrow enough to be filled with three Subarus side-by-side. If she had the control to aim at the very center of the passage, there was a high probability of hitting somewhere on his back.

The moment he realized this, Subaru yanked on Petra's arm and embraced her against his chest. [Hya!] she squeaked, and just as she got out of the way, the same metal darts

as the ones sticking to Subaru's body whizzed past.

If he hadn't pulled her away, the darts would have lined up precisely with her head.

[Subaru: Fuck my life.....!]

Spitting out saliva laced with blood, Subaru shook his head as he sprinted down the passage towards the Mansion, pulling on the lagging Petra's arm to force her onward. His vision was flickering in pain. The world was flashing black and red. A thin blue light was glowing from the dim passageway. That, and the alternating red and black blended into one as the world grew indistinct.

Only a single moment of attack and defense had completely depleted Subaru's energy and stamina.

Even if he returned to the Mansion like this, he would have no immediate means of breaking out of this situation. And, relying only on the hope in front of his eyes, he clenched his jaw and continued to run.

The terror coursing up his neck in that instant was perhaps the sensation of impending death, which was only perceptible due to his countless experiences with "Dying".

[Subaru: ————!]

With that terrible fear guiding his neck to turn, his black pupils saw the tracks of death. "Slicing through the air" would be too simplistic of a description, for the incoming blade was slaying through the air. The curved blade that was the greatest and vilest weapon in Elsa's arsenal——the Kukri knife, bearing down with its own momentum, was spinning vertically with tremendous speed towards Subaru and Petra's backs.

A velocity that made reaction impossible. Sheer power that made parrying unthinkable. Faced with such a thing, the fact that Subaru could make this sudden motion with his arm was nothing short of miraculous.

He reached out his right hand to catch the tip of the knife with his fingers, and indeed managed to pinch it between his index and middle finger——but without reducing even a fraction of the blade's velocity or power, the middle, ring and pinky fingers on Subaru's

right hand scattered into the air.

The knife went on to cut vertically through Subaru's arm straight from the wrist to the elbow, splitting it in two. The chopped off outer flap of the arm slammed into the wall, as the spraying mist of blood dyed the passage and Subaru in dots of red. Screaming. Shrieking. Creating a noise that made one wonder if his throat will break, rip and crack. His vision filled with red, and his molars fractured under the force of his clenching jaws. He lifted his half-sheared arm. It was red. Only red. He saw something white. But it was instantly turned red. He couldn't think of this thing as belonging to him anymore. It was only an unnecessary object, giving off pain.

Cut it off. Go away. I have no use for an organ that only gives off pain. I don't want you. Go away, begone, fuck off. Fuck you! Just die! die! die!—— *a touch*.

There was the touch of a hand holding onto his. Opposite the limb of nothing but pain, there was still a warmth here. The moment he felt it, his scream stopped. His throat was broken. The neurons in his brain, having gone far beyond their capacity for feeling pain, burst. He forgot the pain. But not that warmth.

Drawing in his arm, he swung out his steps, and shaking his throat that had lost its voice, Subaru ran through the passage painted with blood. Legs. So heavy. Arms. So heavy. Was he pulling them, or were they pulling him? He didn't even know. Didn't know. Didn't know. And didn't want to know.

End of the passage. Back to the staircase. Run up the spiralling stairs and he will be in the Mansion. What will he do once he's in the Mansion? Who will, who could, who can help him there, Emilia, Rem——?

[Subaru: i... wi..ll.....!]

Not let it end here. It is not over yet. It cannot end yet.

He couldn't see a way. He didn't find anything. He tried to reach, but hadn't grasped a thing. But how could he throw everything away here?

He looked up. It was a long way to the top of the spiralling stairs. His legs were tangled. His tongue was numb. Life was draining through the blood dripping from his arm. Eroding, fading, he drew up the warmth of his left hand. And,

[???: ——baru-sama!!]

The call of a wild beast. And the sound of a heavy object landing from above. On the steps in front of Subaru's eyes, he saw a broad back. Shrouded within the smoke and dust, was an expensive black apron-dress. Her long golden hair swaying in the icy wind, she rose up from her crouched landing.

Seeping through the stern face that turned around—— was a familiar emotion of worry,
[Subaru: fre...deric.....]

[Frederica: Don't talk! That wound is..... too serious]

Just as he recognized her and tried calling her name, Frederica's face turned pale at the sight of Subaru's wounds. She looked painfully at Subaru's half-sheared-off right arm, and then, trailing her eyes over the blood that covered half of his body,

[Frederica: a.....]

With a gasp so quiet as to disappear, she swallowed her breath. That was probably how shocking Subaru's dreadful state was. By now, owing to the endogenous anesthetics flooding through his brain, Subaru himself had already lost sensitivity to the pain. Breathing raggedly, there was saliva endlessly dripping down the corner of his mouth. Spitting out the overflowing bloody foam in his mouth, Subaru was trying to tell Frederica something,

[Subaru: auuoAgh——!]

[Frederica: ——Careful!!]

From across the darkness, the Kukri knife came slashing once more.

The revolving blade pregnant with death was aimed directly at Frederica's head. Seeing the shimmer of steel, Subaru raised his voice, and Frederica reacted by drawing something from her waist. With a flash—— the darkness of the passageway was scattered by sparks, and the curved blade was deflected with a high-pitched ring. What had achieved this was,

[Frederica: It seems we have an intruder]

Crossing her arms as she said this—— there were now clawed gauntlets attached to Frederica's hands. From that self-possessed reaction, it would seem that she was facing a familiar prey.

In a way, that rugged equipment was all too fitting for someone like Frederica. Ripping the air as she readied her arms before her, Frederica looked back at Subaru,

[Frederica: Get to the Mansion. Signal when you're at the top. Then I'll disengage]

[Subaru: bu...t.....]

[Frederica: With your injuries you'll only get in the way. ——Please take care of Petra]

Though he wanted to stay, Frederica's final pleading words pushed Subaru from behind. Swallowing the rest of what he was about to say, Subaru pulled Petra's tiny body close. Compared to dragging her by the arm as he ran, he could be faster if he held her. Petra entered his arm without resistance, and Subaru backed away towards the stairs,

[Subaru: d...on't die.....]

[Frederica: Of course not. ——I'm not halfway through yet]

Dragging his legs, reluctant to leave, Subaru dashed up the stairs with his sights set on the top. Making his way up the spiral, the sounds of blade clashing on blade followed him from below. The narrow space robbed Elsa of her mobility, so in a direct confrontation it

would be a match of raw power. In that case, Frederica may even have a chance of winning—— at least, that was the hope he wished to cling to.

Spitting out his crushed molars, Subaru cursed at his useless legs. Faster, defter, every second he spent climbing the stairs brought Frederica a second closer to her fate. Faster faster, to the top, to the top, to the top——

[Subaru: I...m.....here!!]

Reaching the top, panting with ragged breaths, his knees dropped onto the carpet. Crawling in that collapsed state, he stuck his head into the passage and shouted down the stairs.

[Subaru: fre, derica! Now——!!]

He could seal the passage to cut Elsa off as soon as Frederica reaches the top of the stairs. Realizing this as he shouted, Subaru turned and tumbled toward the statue-switch that controlled the door. Taking its head in his hand, he waited for Frederica to fly out of the gap. But——

[Subaru: ——wh]

The overwhelming crashing roar of a tremendous impact and collapse lashed onto Subaru's ears. Falling building materials breaking into each other spewed up a swirling plume of smoke as it sent tremors through the entire Mansion.

What happened... Subaru left the statue's side and returned to the passage. Then, peering inside—— he saw that the winding, spiraling stairs had collapsed as if having vanished into thin air.

[Subaru: This..... a]

This destruction was not the consequence of shoddy architecture. Breaking off so cleanly without causing the slightest damage to the passage itself, it was nothing like an

unanticipated collapse. It was by design that the stairwell collapsed on its own when some mechanism was activated.

Perhaps it was meant for covering one's tracks after escaping, or, like now, to guard against the passage from being used as an invasion route, though he couldn't be sure which it was. The only thing that was certain was that,
——At this point, Frederica could no longer come back up.

The possibility of Elsa coming up the stairs had been eliminated, yet it also meant that Frederica had doomed herself. Maybe she could defeat Elsa through pure combat strength and come back around the mountains, but Subaru knew, deep down, that this was impossible.

The moment Subaru thought this, his forgotten wounds twinged with pain as he spat out clots of blood. The darts that burrowed within his neck, shoulder, and waist began to eat at his flesh. He tried to pull them out, but his fingers kept slipping, and the fear of mass bleeding made his fingers tremble unresponsively.

[Subaru: no..w's not... the time to be doing this.....idiot, I'm.....]

There was no time to stop his feet or his thoughts. Whether Frederica's survival was doomed still depended on Subaru's next actions.

Enduring the pain and propping himself on his knees, Subaru tried to stand himself up. But suddenly, he remembered Petra who should still be in his arms. He was holding her when he fled into the office, but where had she——

[Subaru: Pe, tra.....?]

Turning his head around, Subaru found her on the opposite end of the room—— Petra was near the statue. She was lying on her side as if sleeping. He must have inadvertently dropped her in the chaos.

Perhaps she lost consciousness from exhaustion, and would not respond to Subaru's calls. Most likely, in a state of extreme fear and fatigue, she had fainted.

As much as he was worried about Frederica's safety, he must follow her instruction and keep Petra safe. Forcing his trembling knees to stand, Subaru dragged his legs to where Petra had fallen. And, picking up the little girl from the floor,

——He saw the curved blade sticking out from the back of the fallen girl's head to the base of her neck.

Large volumes of blood had seeped from the wound, and a part of her brain had spilled from the fracture in the back of her head. Her soft, chestnut colored hair had been dyed the deep shade of blood, and her gentle, warm palm will never move again.

He held up his right hand. A miserable clump of flesh missing three of its fingers. When he reached out to stop the curved blade, it had passed right through his arm and struck Petra. Even offering up this much, he hadn't protected anything.

[Subaru: ———aaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!!!]

From his shattered throat, he howled out that bloody wail.

※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※

Limping across the Mansion's carpet, Subaru headed toward the West Wing with the expression of a ghost. Cradled within his arms was Petra's corpse. He had covered her with a white sheet, so that no one would see the sight of her death.

The look of surprise was still frozen on her lifeless face, which proved the sole consolation that her death was instantaneous. It would have been too cruel if she had to experience the same pain as Subaru on top of losing her life. But he couldn't save her. There was no consolation to be found anywhere.

[Subaru: ilii.....]

Didn't he come back so that he could save everyone in the Mansion? Didn't he resolve to do everything in his power to help them?

Once again, he had allowed Petra to be caught in this spiral of death. This was already the third time Subaru had seen Petra die—— all of those times, he could have done something to prevent the way they ended.

But unlike last time, when everything was initiated by the Witch Cult, this time, there was a decisive difference.

If Subaru didn't want Petra to be caught in this spiral, he could have opposed Frederica's decision to take Petra as an apprentice.

He should have known the danger of being at his and Emilia's sides.

[Subaru: if i... if only..... there's no end to them]

If he were to talk about what he should or could have done, it would go on forever. Subaru knew this. And yet, although he knew, Subaru's weakness was such that he could not bear but to think about them.

In accordance to those broken thoughts, his steps dragged on heavily. The unstoppable flow of blood left a trail of dark-red spots on the carpet, and every single step sent wrenching pain grinding at his nerves.

One step, and then another, the sound of his flesh and spirit shaving away, pain. Even receiving this punishment was a grace. If Subaru had sinned, then Subaru deserved to be punished.

So that the girl in his arms, the woman who stayed so Subaru could escape, and——

[Subaru: rem.....]

At the end of his path, the girl who went on sleeping ——no calamity must be permitted to touch her.

The West Wing. At last, he had reached the servant's quarters. Despite choosing the shortest path from the office on the highest floor, it felt like it took a lifetime to drag his

wounded body here. The room he was trying to reach was opposite the stairs, at the furthest end of the hallway.

What he would do once he got there was not on his mind even now. His only objective was to get there. His only objective was to touch the girl lying there ——for he had already lost the will to live.

He had lost too much blood, and carried away with that flow of blood, his determination and resolve had already drained from his body. This time he had lost too much. Shrouded in this sense of loss, he didn't seem to be even capable of raising his head as he walked. So, at least, let it end by her side.

By the side of the only girl in this world whom Subaru could reveal his weakness to. Dragging a trail of blood behind him, half leaning on the wall, turning that meager intent into obsession, Subaru's body arrived in front of his destined room—— in front of Rem's bedroom.

Setting the cradled Petra down against the wall, he pulled aside the sheets and closed her eyelids. It was the only thing he could do to dress up her appearance in death. Touching her cheek, and lightly tracing his finger on her lip, he lowered his head at her cold empty vessel,

[Subaru: Sorry..... i'm so sorry..... I'm a stupid... useless.....h]

There should have been a way, but Subaru's own stupidity didn't allow him to see it. The result was Petra being the sacrifice, and his words of apology could no longer reach her. His falling tears landing on Petra's knees, Subaru shook his head, and lifted the sheets over Petra's lifeless face once more. Then, standing up, he turned around.

[Elsa: ——I think it was rather mean to leave me there like that]

On the other end of the hallway, stepping on the same stairs Subaru had just limped down from, was a gorgeous black haired woman. Playing with the ends of her long black braid with the fingers of one hand, she dangled her blood drenched Kukri knife from the other . A black mantle over a black bodysuit. She was wearing the same combination as when he

saw her in the Capital. She was supposed to have been fighting Frederica, but there was not a single trace of battle visible. Whether it was in terms of wounds, or fatigue.

The fact that she appeared here—— and the way she appeared, undeniably proved what must have happened to Frederica.

Adding one more to the list of people his apologies could not reach, all Subaru could do was look up to the ceiling, cursing his own incompetence.

[Elsa: You managed to walk this way with those wounds. I'm very impressed]

[Subaru: is... there a prize for that? your life would do fine.....]

[Elsa: Can I take that as a profession of love? That my life is your heart's desire?]

[Subaru: i'll trample it to mush... hand it over.....]

Wanting to vomit at Elsa's non-sequitur reply, Subaru glared at the murderer as he stood himself up against the wall. Turning up his gaze, he locked Elsa's face in his sights. Her eyes were looking up and down Subaru's torn-up body,

[Elsa: The aroma of blood, the scent of rage, the fragrance of Death..... ahh, you are exquisite in every sense. Your intestines are exactly to my liking too, I'm all too pleased to say]

[Subaru: abnormal bitch..... what're you going on about.....]

Embracing herself, with an expression of ecstasy on her face, Elsa looked at Subaru with a gaze that could not contain its arousal. Even though she was a beautiful woman, those deranged, abnormal eyes injected only disgust and horror into Subaru.

Seeing an emotion of rejection surfacing on Subaru's face, Elsa retained that debauched glamour on her cheeks,

[Elsa: It's nice to talk to you, but..... I wouldn't want to be scolded for losing sight of my objective. That spirit and the Half-Witch girl I met in the Capital, do they happen to be home?]

[Subaru: You should've phoned in before coming, would've saved you the trouble. We would've hired some mercenaries and put on a grand big welcome]

[Elsa: You're not going to answer. Then, I better ask your bowels]

Opening her red lips, sensuously wetting it with her peach-colored tongue, she lifted up her knife, and smiled in ecstasy as she licked the drops of blood off the side of its blade. Then, lowering her posture, she made the blade scream as she dashed forward like a spider. Too fast. Can't imagine intercepting at all. But,

[Subaru: Like hell am I gonna die at your hands.....!]

Saying this, Subaru pushed open the door to Rem's bedroom.

Elsa furrowed her brows at Subaru's action, unable to understand, and he felt just the slightest satisfaction to see that reaction.

He had already resigned himself to the fact that there was no way out. His wounds were deep, and he could not stop his life from seeping away. The fate of this loop was like a candle flame in the wind. In that case, at least he will not give Elsa the satisfaction.

He had no wish to die by those blades. If he will fall into Elsa's hands, he would rather die first. But before that, he will not allow *her* to be violated.

It would be a euphemism to call it "the bitter choice", but it would mean nothing more than a one-sided lovers' suicide.

If the alternative was the way Petra and Frederica fell under Elsa's blade,

Then, in this world that was ending, he will at least dispatch her with his own hands——

[Subaru: and follow you right after.....]

She will go on ahead, and he will follow behind. With this resolve, he turned into Rem's bedroom——

[Subaru: ——huh?]

——Lined with bookshelves, row on row, the Forbidden Library welcomed Subaru as he was preparing for the end.

Chapter 35 [The Young Girl's Gospel]

Enclosed on all sides, the room was filled with the choking scent of old books.

Stepping through the opened door, stricken by this sight and smell, Subaru's mouth gaped open wordlessly as he realized, half a second too late, that he had stepped onto a floor that did not belong to the place he was hoping for—

——and that this delay in his awareness proved fatal.

[Subaru: The Forbidden Library!?!]

He had reached the place which he couldn't find while searching all throughout the Mansion. The undesired timing and the unforeseen opportunity created a vacuum in Subaru's heart, robbing him of the time before the door slammed shut behind him.

[Subaru: ——!]

As though shoved forth by a wind from the outside, Subaru's body was sucked into the Library. With the same momentum, the door clamped shut, sending a small breeze tickling the back of Subaru's neck.

Turning around at the violent sound, confirming that the room had been separated from the hallway, he understood.

Why the Forbidden Library opened to him here, and why it had shut its doors.

[Subaru: O-Open it——!!]

Reaching for the doorknob, he noticed the state of his right arm and reached out the left one as well. His blood-drenched fingers wrenched violently at the knob, sending loud clatters into the air, but although the knob was turning, it conveyed none of his intentions to the door. The screech of the knob's futile rotation only served to compound Subaru's agitation.

[Beatrice: ——No matter how much you struggle to get out, it's no use, you know]

A voice flew to Subaru's ears from behind while he was desperately wrestling with the door.

Swinging around, and leaning his back against the door flap—he saw the girl in the depths of the Library, staring directly at him with a cold and indifferent gaze.

Long, cream-colored curls and an extravagant dress. A small body, and cute, yet peevish features. She was every bit the same girl that Subaru knew.

[Subaru: Beatrice.....]

[Beatrice: You look quite terrible, I suppose. You'll dirty the Library's floor, so don't move around so much.....]

[Subaru: Open the door! NOW! LET ME OUT, NOW!!]

Seeing her coldly staring at his wounds, Subaru screamed, ignoring everything Beatrice said. Not hearing her instruction to “stop bleeding everywhere”, Subaru flailed his wretched, profusely bleeding right arm,

[Subaru: Why, why did you show up now!? Why! WHY NOW!? LET ME GO BACK! HURRY! NOW! RIGHT NOW!!]

[Beatrice:And what will you do once you go back, I suppose? Even if you go back with these unsightly wounds, Betty has no idea what you could possibly do]

[Subaru: I know better than anyone that I can't do anything!! But it doesn't matter!!]

He did not want to go back in order to face Elsa, but to enter the room where he was supposed to be, to go to that sleeping girl's side, and——

[Subaru: If I'm in the Library, and Door Crossing is lifted..... then that murderer would, the room.....]

When she realizes that Subaru had vanished, that lunatic would probably find herself tilting her head. Before searching the Mansion for the disappeared Subaru, she would find

the lonely girl sleeping inside. What that wanton murderer would do when she finds her, defenseless in her sleep—— did not warrant a second thought.

[Subaru: THAT'S WHY——!]

[Beatrice: It's already too late, you know]

Subaru, roaring at the top of his lungs as if to shake off this surging apprehension, was instantly washed over by Beatrice's abrupt and poignant whisper.

Seeing her cast down her eyes and shake her head, for a moment, Subaru froze. His brain chewed over the meaning of her words, and his thoughts came to a halt.

——What did this girl say just now?

[Subaru: Too late..... what do you..... mean?]

[Beatrice: The reason why you think you want to go back to that room... is already gone, I suppose]

[Subaru: ————]

In front of Subaru's disjointed question, Beatrice gave this dispassionate reply.

His throat choked up, his eyes opened to their limits, and, by the time he realized it, he had fallen to his knees. His shoulders dropped, his head faced downwards, and a terrible ring echoed within his skull.

Pain, pain, the forgotten pain revived as noise eroded Subaru's consciousness. It would be alright if only everything could be drowned in that noise and be swept away, he honestly thought. He didn't want to understand any of it. He didn't want to realize it.

Nonetheless,

[Beatrice: Your wounds, let me see them, I suppose. They're too miserable, I can't stand looking at them]

Walking up to Subaru, who had collapsed onto the floor, Beatrice folded her knees and looked over the wounds on his right arm, left waist and right shoulder, casting him a frown of reproach. A faint light covered over her hand, which she pressed against his most severely wounded right arm ——replacing the heat of pain, something of an itch coursed through his arm. And, along with the sound of splashing water, the fabric of his flesh began to mend.

The bleeding stopped, and slowly, and slowly, answering to the light, a membrane spread over the open wound as the sheared off area was repopulated with cells spurring to recovery. Although,

[Beatrice: It will take time to return to its original width, and your missing fingers won't be coming back, I suppose.The wounds on your hip and shoulder—]

[Subaru:what the hell are you doing]

A voice devoid of emotion leaked from Subaru's lips.

Intent on healing his wounds, Beatrice furrowed her brows and held out her palm, emanating with healing energy, in front of Subaru's eyes,

[Beatrice: I don't like this either. But I have no choice, so I'm treating your wounds. Betty is the only one in the Mansion who can heal such extensive wounds, I suppose. You should thank me you know]

[Subaru: heal..... my wounds.....? what for.....?]

[Beatrice: These wounds would be life-threatening if left alone, I suppose. And though I don't particularly care whether you live or die, I would rather you not die here]

Closing one eye, perhaps disregarding Subaru's words as delirium from his injuries, Beatrice uttered this cold reply as she prepared to continue healing. But,

[Subaru: ————gh]

[Beatrice: Ah]

Sensing the healing waves burying away his wounds, Subaru swung his injured arm aside, prompting a small sound of surprise from Beatrice.

He taxed his trembling knees and rolled onto his side, painting large swathes of the Forbidden Library's floor in red as he distanced himself from her, all the while keeping his ghastly stare fixed upon her face.

Panting with ragged breaths, his frantic movements dislodged the darts buried in his hip. Shrill clatters rang out as they landed on the floor, followed by the sound of free-flowing liquid that was blood flowing from his wounds. Streaming down his thighs, and spreading out from his knees, it flooded over the floor in a river of blood.

Beatrice's breath stopped at this sight, while Subaru bared his teeth,

[Subaru: I don't need any healing.....! IF YOU DON'T CARE WHETHER I LIVE OR DIE..... WHY DID YOU BOTHER SAVING ME!?!]

[Beatrice: That's because..... you were too unsightly. I couldn't bear to look.....]

[Subaru: Why..... why me!? If you wanted to save someone, why didn't you save Petra..... or Frederica!? If we had your help, even if we didn't fight, we could've just ran away.....anything would have been better.....!]

If they had Door Crossing to separate them from the outside world, they would have been able to stay beyond the reach of Elsa's relentless pursuit. If used the correct way, there is no better ability specialized for escape. Whether it was Petra, who didn't run away until it was too late, or Frederica, who stayed behind to cover their escape, or Rem, sound asleep in her bed——!

[Subaru: You could've saved all of them.....! I'm weak, I'm stupid..... but you could have done it..... so why didn't you.....?]

[Beatrice: Why would Betty..... there was no reason for Betty to help those people you spoke of, I suppose. No reason that I know of. It was none of my business]

[Subaru: In that case.....! You had no reason to save me either, did you!?!]

Watching Beatrice reluctantly shaking her head at his plea, Subaru slammed the floor with his right arm that was still in the process of healing.

[Subaru: Why did you help me!? Why did you save me!? Was it all just on a whim? What made me any different from the rest of them!? Rem was always a good girl, there were things Frederica still wanted to do..... and Petra was still so small..... they were all far more worth saving than me! Didn't their lives also have meaning..... have value!?!]

[Beatrice: Value? Meaning? Why should Betty respect such conceited inventions, I suppose. Your arrogance is beyond intolerable, Human!]

[Subaru: Where the hell is the logic in that!? First you wouldn't see me when I was looking all over for you, then you choose a critical time like this to show up! If you didn't see any value in me or those girls..... you should've just kept minding your own business and stayed shut up in this room!!]

Why did she have to appear now, after everything was already too late?

She could have stayed hidden so that even Elsa couldn't have detected her, but now, once Elsa realizes where Subaru had gone, Beatrice's existence could very well have been exposed.

In that case, there was a chance that even this girl wouldn't be able to escape the murderer's blade. So why did she take such risks to let a half-dead Subaru in?

Why did she save him now, when he had already lost the will to live, and wanted only death?

[Subaru: I don't care if you did this on a whim, but..... if you want to save me..... if you still have even a shred of desire to help me..... then kill me... now.....]

[Beatrice: What..... are you saying, I suppose.....]

[Subaru: NOW! ME! KILL ME NOW! Before everything is written down, before everything becomes irreversible! Kill me! KILL! KILL ME!]

Spewing up blood mixed with spit, clawing at the floor with both his maimed right hand and his remaining left hand, Subaru shrieked out his appeal.

Before his reason to live becomes entirely lost, before his inaction leads him to an unrecoverable future.

He shrieked for this useless, powerless, incompetent mass to be extinguished from this world.

But Beatrice did not accept his plea that was carried within the shrieking of his very soul.

She shook her head, and with a look confusion and displeasure emerging on her face, [Beatrice: I don't understand, I don't understand at all. I can't understand you Humans, I suppose. Why are you..... why would you say such a thing now, when you still have your life?]

[Subaru: You aren't saving me by saving my life! Right now this life is nothing but agony! It shouldn't be here, I shouldn't be here..... If you're saying you won't save me.....]

If he can't depend on others, then he will just put an end to this miserable existence himself——

Seeing Subaru's breath pause with this resolve, Beatrice let slip a small sound.

[Beatrice: ah]

And, as her voice entered his ears, without hesitation, Subaru stuck out his tongue, and,

[Subaru: ————!]

Biting down with all his force, he committed to this suicidal act.

Excruciating pain. Pain of an entirely different magnitude from the pain of his right arm. No matter how much he experiences it, he can never develop tolerance to this. No matter how the injury was incurred, no matter which part of his body it came from, it was always new, excruciating, intolerable pain that he could never grow used to. Regardless of where or when, all pain is equal in that sense.

Blood pouring from his mouth, Subaru turned up the whites of his eyes and fainted on the spot.

Falling over, his eyes swam as his limbs began to spasm. Agonizing pain. Unable to breathe. His near-severed tongue lodged itself in his throat, suffocating him from within. [Beatrice: ——what're you doing!?!]

It was not the kind of injury that resulted in immediate death. The acute, dull pain pulsed, shocking his brain in fits. His limbs shook uncontrollably as streams of bloody tears ran across his cheeks, conveying his unbearable agony. The half-severed tip of his tongue dangled from the edge of his lips, indicative of Subaru's insufficient resolve at the final moment of his act to end his life.

Since coming to this Parallel World, this was the third time that Subaru had chosen to commit suicide.

The first was during the loop in the Mansion, when he killed himself with the resolve to bring back what was irretrievable.

The second was at the end of the loop that began within the Capital, where he killed himself when he realized that Rem's existence had been wiped from this world. He had stabbed a knife into his throat, but nothing was changed.

And the third time he killed himself—— although he had no guarantee that he would be able to return, he simply could no longer endure living on in this world. It was too heavy, and too unreasonable a burden. And so, staking everything on this slightest hope, in order to retrieve what he had lost——

[Beatrice:no.. don't leave me all alone.....]

A trembling voice called to him from the world that was growing distant.

The voice grew further, and further, until it disappeared entirely——

※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※

——When he woke, the first thing that struck Subaru's nostrils was the scent of dust.

[Subaru: huh.....?]

Waiting for his consciousness to catch up, turning his neck with his eyes still closed, Subaru realized that he had awoken.

Lying sideways on the ground, feeling the coldness of the surface seeping into his body, it went without saying that the restart point was still inside the Tomb.

Then, sitting his body up, he opened his eyes to look over his dark surroundings. His vision, obscured by tears, was still unreliable so soon after waking, and could not make out what he was searching for.

Nevertheless, he was relieved to have returned from death once more. If the place he returned to was the Tomb, then the restart point hadn't changed.

Inside the Tomb, the time would be immediately after Subaru passed the first Trial. Emilia would be collapsed at his side, and he should start by waking her up.

[Subaru: head, hurts.....]

Rubbing himself between the brows, lightly shaking his head, Subaru's mind worked to organize his current circumstances.

There were already countless things for him to consider without the events of the previous loop added on top. Still, he hadn't found a single solution. Even the light he was supposed to have seen now felt like a moth lamp luring him into another trap.

As though circumventing one pitfall had only led him to another.

[Subaru: It's like that free gift you get from that shady fellow on Kenzan.....]

“Deadly” would be an appropriate description here.

The Sanctuary and the Trials. His relationship with Garfiel. The attack on the Mansion. The inexplicable disappearance of the grace period, his vengeance against Elsa—— and how to save Rem and the others.

They were all problems that would turn his brain to mush, but he was already fortunate enough to have been granted the chance to continue worrying over them.

Otherwise, it could have all ended there, and he was not entirely without some sense of resignation to that possibility. But as long as that much can be overcome, he will be able to save everything——

[Subaru: It'll be painful to have to pretend not knowing anything in front of Emilia again, but——]

Mumbling this, Subaru felt his hazy vision beginning to clear. Snorting the dust out of his nose, he decided he should first look for Emilia.

With that thought, he lifted his right hand to his forehead like a visor, when he finally noticed it.

——His right hand was missing three of its fingers.

[Subaru: N——!? Aah!?]

Seeing the wound that should not be there, the scars that could not possibly be carried over, Subaru's throat groaned in shock. Struck by the fact that he had taken a far too optimistic view of the world, he cast his trembling eyes over his surroundings.

Cold floor, dry stone walls. The smell of mold. The space that Subaru had hoped for was the Tomb. But the reality in front of his eyes was a corner of the Library lined with packed-full bookshelves, a room drifting with the unique fragrance of vellum enduring the passage of time,

[Subaru: The Forbidden Library..... how, d.....]

Inexplicably, his physical body was still in the place he should already have bid farewell to. His thoughts turning to the worst, Subaru began checking over his body.

The worst possibility—— was that the moment he set foot into the Forbidden Library, the checkpoint of the world had been set.

Unable to hide his consternation, Subaru stared at the right arm he was holding up to his face. Three fingers were missing, and a third of its width was lost. However, the wounds of the arm had already been sealed, and the contorted, discolored flesh was in the process of regeneration.

His waist and right shoulder that had been pierced by darts showed no apparent injuries, and there was only an intermittent sense of discomfort and a strained sensation on his skin.

At the very least, this could not have been the moment he stepped into the Forbidden Library. Then, by the process of elimination, there could only be one possibility.

[Beatrice: ——You're finally awake, I suppose]

For Subaru, who had realized that fact, this was the voice he least wanted to hear.

That careless attitude, that bored-with-the-world intonation, obviously worried but trying her hardest to suppress it, that voice in soprano that was deep down desiring some connection.

Without moving from his seat on the floor, Subaru turned his head.

Even now, he did not abandon the faint hope that he would see the silver-haired girl behind him. But instead, shattering that fantasy, was a young girl in a dress, seated on a wooden stepladder.

Appearing no different than before he lost consciousness, it was Beatrice, looking down at Subaru, holding a book in her hands.

Seeing an inadvertent sigh leaking from Subaru's mouth, she slammed her book shut, and slowly stepped down from her stepladder,

[Beatrice: All because of your stupid actions, I had to really struggle, you know. The injuries on your arm, shoulder, hip, and tongue should all be healed now. There shouldn't be any discomfort]

[Subaru:]

[Beatrice: You just picked up your life and you have nothing to say, I suppose? Well, hopefully this taught you a lesson to not do anything stupid anymore.....]

[Subaru: you..... do you have any idea what you've done?]

[Beatrice: w.....?]

Saying these as if asking to be thanked, Beatrice approached the silent Subaru only to be met by these wrenched out words. And, the moment her face frowned up,

[Subaru: ————!]

Subaru suddenly stood up from the ground, and, shooting out his left arm, he grabbed Beatrice by her extravagant dress. [Ah!], her mouth opened in surprise as he pulled her close, bringing her face up against his,

[Subaru: ——WHO THE HELL ASKED YOU TO SAVE ME!??]

[Beatrice:———a]

[Subaru: Do you realize what you've done!? Because of you, it was all for nothing! Everything, everything that I could have fixed is put at risk because of you! Why didn't you just let me die!? I'm still alive, but what good is that..... WHAT GOOD IS THAT!? WHAT!?!]

By acting without regard for his life, Subaru should have earned the right to start over. But he was held back by the girl in front of him, and his wish was not granted. And all that

remained to Subaru now was an indescribable sense of loss and endless rage directed towards Beatrice.

[Subaru: Saving me on a whim, healing my injuries..... are you satisfied now? You want me to thank you? Ah, yeah, thank you! Thank you for saving my life! Even though everything else is already lost, at least MY LIFE'S BEEN SAVED!]

[Beatrice: B-Betty was only..... only.....]

[Subaru: You came for me at the very last moment, how can I thank you enough!? Of course, as usual, there you are looking down on me with that carefree expression like there's not a hurry in the world. You're good at it, aren't you? You like that, don't you? Looking down and sneering at the little Human beings and—— a]

Reaching the extreme limits of hatred, his face contorted with a grotesque smile, Subaru pulled Beatrice close and showered these insults upon her. With this heartless act, he tried to bury all his dejection, disappointment and loss. And yet, his words abruptly ended——

[Beatrice: ——kh]

[Subaru: Ah.....]

——When he saw large droplets of tears falling from the eyes of the girl he was holding up-close.

Seeing them, the blood that was rushing to his head instantly fell, and the ugly vindictiveness he had just let slip now became more terrifying than he could bear.

With the unraveling of his spite, his fingers loosened from Beatrice's body. Suddenly freed from his grasp, the young girl's body leaned backwards into the bookshelf behind her, and dropped to her knees.

A fierce nausea rose up in his chest. Becoming aware of what he had just done, he could not stand the hideousness of his own heart.

Ugly. Twisted. What was it except lashing out? To Beatrice, who knew nothing about his “Return by Death”, she was merely healing his wounds when he was on the verge of death. Instead of thanking the person who had saved his life, he had abused her for no reason at all.

He understood this logically. But his emotions did not accept it. Tossed around from within by the two polar extremes of his heart, searching for something to say, he lifted his eyes towards the fallen Beatrice,

[Subaru: No..... I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to..... it wasn’t... your fault.....]

If it was anyone’s fault, it was undoubtedly Subaru’s.

Knowing what would happen, without doing anything to guard against it, he had walked directly into the tiger’s den and stepped on its tail. Once again, it was those around him who paid the price. And now, to blame everyone but himself ——was beyond the limits of Pride.

Emotionally, he wanted to blame everything on this uninformed girl. And he still couldn’t swallow his emotions of the fact that she had hidden herself from him only to show up in that instant.

Nevertheless, they could do nothing to pardon him for the reproaches he shouted at that girl.

[Subaru: I’m sorry. My wounds... thank you for healing them. But now, I must.....]

At least, he should go somewhere away from her, and choose a different place to kill himself.

There was no longer any reason for Subaru to continue on in this world. Too much had been lost. And Subaru was not strong enough to live in a world without what he couldn’t bear to lose.

So, with these concise words of gratitude, Subaru averted his eyes and prepared to leave the Forbidden Library——

[Subaru: ————]

——When he noticed, dropped at the collapsed Beatrice's side, there was a tome bound all in black.

Plain cover. Thick structure. It was the size of a large dictionary, and appeared heavy enough to be unwieldy. In any case, there was a certain familiarity that Subaru could not pull his eyes away from.

Why here, why is it here now?

[Subaru: The Gospel... is in the dragon carriage..... it shouldn't.... be here in the Library.....]

The Witch Cult's Gospel that once belonged to Petelgeuse, taken from him after his death, was now in Subaru's possession. But, having decided that it was not a book that belonged in a Library, he had kept it himself while taking extreme cautions of the unknown functions it may have served. So how could it be here?

Shaking his head at the incomprehensible situation, Subaru reached out his hand to the Gospel that had dropped on the floor, hoping that checking its contents would dispel this unease. But,

[Beatrice: ——No!]

Before Subaru's hand could reach it, the Gospel was snatched away.

Messing up the hems of her dress, with panting breaths, Beatrice clasped the Gospel in her arms as she backed away from Subaru. Keeping distance between them, holding back her sobs, she looked down towards the Gospel in her arms, and appeared to breathe a sigh of relief as she traced her fingers over its covers.

Seeing that gesture as though she was caressing something dear, an ominous dread crept up in Subaru's heart,

[Subaru: Why are you... treating that thing like it's something important to you?]

[Beatrice:]

[Subaru: That's the book those Witch Cultists have..... isn't it? It isn't, is it? It just looks really similar, but they're completely different things, right? You just didn't want me to misunderstand, and that's why you backed away from me, right? Yeah, I know I have a bad habit of jumping to conclusions, and I can get really stubborn when ideas get stuck in my head, and I said mean things to you and my eyes are scary-looking and my personality is all twisted but.....]

[Beatrice:]

[Subaru: Hey—— you'll deny it, won't you?]

While Subaru rambled on and on, trying to make excuses on her behalf, Beatrice only kept her silence. Until, he could only beg.

Seeing him this way, Beatrice let slip a small sigh, and held out the book in her hands so that Subaru could see it,

[Beatrice: It's exactly as you imagined.This is a Gospel. As you said, it is the same as the ones in the Witch Cultists' possession. The guide to happiness. The foundation of life. And the only, singular truth, I suppose]

[Subaru: W-Why..... do you have it? Do they sell it somewhere? A L-LUCKY ITEM that tells your future or something? Some kind of real-life walkthrough that totally breaks the game balance or.....ahh, come on]

[Beatrice:Betty... hasn't been instructed to answer that question, I suppose]

To Subaru's trembling voice, Beatrice flipped quickly through the pages and gave him this cold reply. Seeing the girl's eyes focused on the contents of her book, Subaru felt a numbness encroaching on his tongue,

[Subaru: You won't do anything... unless the book tells you to?]

[Beatrice: That question was not written in the book]

[Subaru: What about healing my wounds? And sheltering me in the Forbidden Library when I was going to be killed?]

[Beatrice: Those questions were not written in the book, I suppose]

[Subaru: And what about talking with me just now? And saving me... when I was trying to die.....?]

[Beatrice: ——I don't know]

Casting down her eyes, Beatrice only returned this emotionless reply.

To see her like a doll, devoid of all emotions, Subaru's lungs convulsed in horror. With light flickering in his eyes such that he forgot how to breathe, he shouted at the top of his voice,

[Subaru: SO YOU CAN'T DO A SINGLE THING UNLESS THE BOOK TELLS YOU SO!?!]

[Beatrice:Yes, I suppose. That is so. Everything of everything is in accordance with the Gospel's guidance. That is the meaning of Betty's life, and the purpose for which Betty exists]

[Subaru: So.....helping me was just written in that book as well!? Saving me when I was dying from the Mabeasts in the forest! And saving me when my heart was worn to its core! Our jokes, our arguments, all that time we had fun playing around like idiots..... none of it was your free will..... IS THAT WHAT YOU'RE TELLING ME?]

[Beatrice: That's..... THAT'S WHAT I'M TRYING TO TELL YOU, I SUPPOSE!!!]

Covering over the last part of Subaru's scathing words, Beatrice shouted back, her face flushing in anger. Taking one step forward, she pointed a single finger at Subaru,

[Beatrice: Everything that Betty has done, and seen, and said up to now is written in here, I suppose. You..... something like you will never move Betty's heart. There should be a limit to your arrogance I suppose, Human]

[Subaru: ————]

[Beatrice: Betty will do what is expected of Betty, and fulfill the meaning of my existence. This life, this span of time, and all that I have sacrificed is for this purpose..... AND I WILL NOT DENY IT FOR THE LIKES OF YOU.....!!]

[Subaru: Bea.....]

Emotions flooded from Beatrice like a broken dam. And although he tried to speak in that instant, he was silenced by an abrupt, overwhelming pressure from the front.

Feeling the sensation of being forced back by a wind, unable to resist, Subaru realized that his body was being pushed towards the door. ——And, just like that, he was flung off of his feet.

[Subaru: Sto..... Beatrice!]

[Beatrice: Betty's everything is for Mother! And Mother is the only one Betty needs! I don't care about you..... I don't care.....]

[Subaru: ————]

[Beatrice: I don't care. I hate you. I hate you. ——I HATE YOU!]

Shaking her head and hiding the tears streaming down her cheeks, the girl screamed to Subaru as he was flung through the air.

The door opened. The space of the Forbidden Library was driving Subaru out. Before he passed through the door, he clasped onto the doorframe with his right hand. But, with fewer than three fingers, it was not nearly enough. Only his index finger held on, but even that only gave him a few seconds of respite.

Lifting his face, Subaru tried to shout to the crying girl——

[Subaru: Beatri——!]

[Beatrice:u-sama]*

Drowned out by her quiet voice, Subaru's call did not reach her.

Blown away. Wiped out. Space distorted as Subaru's physical body was expelled into a place that shouldn't exist.

[Beatrice:————]

The door thundered shut, the gushing wind halted with the sound, and silence descended on the Library once more.

The girl who was left alone, with an expression as if holding back her sobs, slowly walked into the depths of the room—— stepping onto her usual stepladder and quietly sitting down, she hugged her knees and opened the Gospel with her trembling fingertips. Then,
[Beatrice: Why..... couldn't Betty... ever.....]

In front of the wordless, blank pages, only her sobs resounded pointlessly throughout the silence of the room.

Chapter 36 [At The End Of Incomprehension]

——The moment he was ejected from the door, Subaru felt a sense of weightlessness as though the sky and the earth had been reversed.

[Subaru: ——Oooguaah!?!]

The pain of his back striking the solid ground wrenched out all the air from his lungs and left his throat gasping for breath. Carried on by the momentum, he went tumbling across the floor and was only stopped by smashing into a wall. Shaking his head to cast off the ejected sensation, still dazzled from the pain, Subaru lifted his face and opened his eyes.

[Subaru: Beatrice..... hg]

Giving voice to the name of the girl whose name he failed to call at their parting, it was already too late for it to reach her.

The moment Door Crossing was activated, an insurmountable gap had been opened between them. Her rejection was so fierce and deep that Subaru's voice could no longer touch her.

[Subaru: Why do I..... always.....!]

Was there really no way for him to realize his own mistakes except by failing and picking the worst possible choice?

All he wanted was to take the optimal actions leading to the best possible future, but why was he always too weak, foolish and insufficient?

[Subaru: What are you doing with a Gospel..... just, what's with you.....!?!]

The existence of the black-bound book in her hands——the Gospel decisively opened a distance between them.

Until this point, Subaru had been convinced that despite the short amount of time he and Beatrice had spent together, there was certainly "*Something*" that existed between them.

Even though they were always taunting each other, expressing their mutual displeasure at seeing each other, Subaru nonetheless believed that as long as there was that *something*, things could never come to an end between them.

But that was only presumption. Conceit. Misaligned understanding in the extreme.

Subaru's conviction was nothing more than the product of his self-satisfaction, and Beatrice never held any sentiments towards him except the literal meanings of her words. She was merely following the Gospel's orders, and was only putting up with Subaru in order to fulfill her purpose. All the while, in her heart, she was indifferent, or even despised him.

[Subaru:is that really how it is?]

The bond he thought was there was declared to be nonexistent, and his attempts to deny it were cut off by Beatrice's angered cries.

As Subaru imagined, their connection was confirmed to be counterfeit. She had never been moved in the slightest by Subaru's existence, and there was only ever the sense of necessity behind her actions.

[Subaru: All those times you smiled, got mad, or protected me..... were they all just some lies written in a script.....?]

How is that possible, Subaru's brittle heart still denied it. In that final moment, Beatrice's tearful voice at their parting had drawn a mist over the veracity of her words.

No matter what, it was still too early for him to come to that conclusion.

[Subaru: Who cares if it's written inside some book, all I remember is that you saved me..... nothing can change that fact. It's a debt that only I remember]

In the loops beginning in the Mansion, more than once, Subaru had been saved by Beatrice.

There were all those times when he loitered in the Forbidden Library to gather his thoughts after Return by Death, and when she more literally saved his life when he was littered with the Mabeasts' curses. And, in that lost world where he had allowed Rem to

die, when he was hounded by Ram and Roswaal, she went so far as to twist the meaning of their offhand verbal contract in order to protect him.

Even if that great debt no longer existed anywhere in this world, it still remained within Subaru's heart.

[Subaru: That time..... I was glad]

Even when he was convinced that there was no one left on his side, she saved him nonetheless.

When he thought Rem and Ram were his enemies, when he couldn't fathom Roswaal's intentions, and when he was worn to his core when even Emilia couldn't completely trust him, Beatrice alone had saved him.

Just how much that temporary, transient contract had saved him was beyond what words could convey, and a kindness he could never fully repay.

[Subaru: I'll repay that debt. I still don't know whether you loaned it to me of your own free will, or if you were following that book's wishes..... but I'll find out]

Obviously, he could no longer ask her now after she had so firmly rejected him. So, since Subaru's resolve no longer held any meaning in this world, it will just have to be carried over to the next one.

He held up his right arm. Hand missing three of its fingers. Shoulder and hip twinging. Head banged up. And tongue slightly shortened. Every last one dealt him pain impossible to forget.

He saw Rem beneath his closed eyelids. And Petra. And Frederica. And Beatrice, with her back turned to him. And, at last, there was Emilia.

——Everything that Subaru had failed to grasp because of his mistakes in this world.

In order to retrieve what was lost, he will commit himself to do what he must. To continue what Beatrice had interrupted, and once again dive into that spiral,

[Subaru: ————]

Subaru held out his shortened tongue and gathered the resolve to bite into it once more. But, just the thought of his botched suicide resurrected his anguish, and seized him with fear once more. Hesitation surfaced, and his legs began to tremble. Word games like resolve are worthless when faced with the end.

Holding back such counterproductive emotions, overcoming the unsurpassable dread of impending death and praying to be returned to a time when he could still fix everything, Subaru shut his eyes for the final moment——

[Subaru:where... is this place?]

He realized that the room where Door Crossing had dumped him was a place he had never seen before.

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To Subaru, this was an unknown space completely different from the familiar Roswaal Mansion.

Damp stone slabs, and grimy walls covered in sprawling ivy. Randomly arranged tables with rusted metal tools scattered over them that evoked unease by sight.

And above all,

[Subaru: Uu——!?!]

A dense, putrid stench, which, once noticed, could no longer be severed from his mind. It was different from the rotten stench of organic waste, but there was no other way to describe it but as a horrid rotting stench that injected him with the urge to vomit. Quickly covering his mouth, Subaru's empty stomach retched out all of its fluids.

Seeing the yellow stomach bile splashing onto the floor, panting, Subaru glared through his surroundings. The more he looked, the stranger the unknown space appeared.

A dark room covered by stone slabs, its space was about twice the area of the drawing room in Roswaal's Mansion. It wasn't large enough to be considered spacious, but it couldn't be called cramped either.

Strewn about one corner of the room were tables with mysterious instruments scattered on top, and opposite the tables—— littering the vast majority of the room, were, [Subaru: Broken tables and... crystals.....? Crystals or, fragments of magic minerals? And then this hole.....]

Looking at the ground before him, there were carcasses of broken tables and deactivated magic crystals scattered across the floor, and even further ahead, was a wide, gaping hole about four meters in diameter. In the absence of sufficient lighting, it was all the more impossible to gauge the true depth of the pitfall.

If he turned up his head, he would see pale blue light emanating from glowing moss on the walls. Like the ones growing freely in the forests, they absorb mana from the atmosphere to fuel their light. The forests surrounding the Mansion were spared from absolute darkness by the light of these very same moss along with the light of the stars. Feeling his way across the floor with the aid of moss-light, enduring the unpleasant sensation of moisture soaking into his pants and the slime sticking to his palms, he peeked into the depths of the hole.

A quiet, cold wind swept up from below, carrying a nose-turning—— or rather, nose-demolishing stench along with it.

[Subaru: Uu..... pugh. Not having the courage to look inside would've been the correct choice, huh..... what is that smell?]

If it had been a stench characteristic of something harboring life, then Subaru's imagination might have turned to the worst. But this rising stench was something different from that of rotting flesh, and was closer to a strong chemical smell.

Like the sensation of sniffing some stringent medicine, a painful shock jolted his nose. The

stench rising from the dark bottom of this pit was wholly unlike the scent of any living organism.

[Subaru: ——something else]

Both physically and mentally unwilling to check the bottom of the pit again, Subaru wiped off his nose and consciously breathed through his mouth as he looked around the room. The first thing his eyes landed on were the scattered carcasses of tables and expended magic crystals. The metal tables seemed to have been crushed by some tremendous impact, and the magic crystals appeared to have been stacked on the tables before that. Slowly flipping over one of the mangled tables, he noticed some sort of pattern engraved on its surface.

[Subaru: Looks like..... some kind of magic circle.....]

Magic circles like this show up quite a lot in Alternate-World Fantasy genres, but Subaru couldn't recall seeing anything similar since coming to this world. Basically, the magic in this world passes through living bodies to interfere with the outside world, and aside from magic lamps and Metias, Subaru had yet to find any exceptions.

So he was quite surprised to find a magic circle here, but,

[Subaru: Actually, does it even do anything? If it does, then..... why would they leave the circle in a place like this.....]

Could it be that the magic couldn't be activated here directly, and was instead meant to serve some remote functionality? Or perhaps it was some kind of system to run the spell continuously without the caster being present?

[Subaru: If that was the case, it'd explain why there're so many used up magic crystals next to it]

After the magic crystals serving as its energy source were depleted, the magic circle lost its power—— that would be the most plausible explanation. But, despite reaching this conclusion, what Subaru still did not understand was the true purpose of the hole and the

broken tables. Nor could he completely rule out the possibility that the room had been purposely designed to explode in the event that the spell was interrupted.

Regardless,

[Subaru: In the end... I still have no idea where I am]

A dark hole seemingly going down forever. A magic circle used for some kind of spell, surrounded by magic crystals. Looking over the rotting, putrid room, he saw another tipped-over table in the corner—— and picked up one of the rusted metal tools beside it. Resembling a plier or nipper, it was the kind of utensil one might use when crafting plastic models. It was covered in the same slime that was smeared across the floor, and, more importantly, perhaps due to the passage of time in which it had spent in disuse, it disintegrated into dust at the touch of Subaru's hand.

Not only the tools, but the table was in the same condition. After years upon years of exposure, its bent legs had deteriorated to the brink of dust, and when he nudged it with his foot with the slightest force, it lost its shape and transformed into powdered iron. There was no other information to be gained beyond that. But if there was just one point he could not get out of his mind, it would be,

[Subaru: The way this was destroyed, and its timing, was drastically different from the table in front of the hole.....]

Unlike the one which had become brittle from the passage of time before welcoming its collapse, the table beside the hole was obviously crushed by some destructive force. And, judging from the state of the ground beneath it, its destruction came extremely recently—— probably within the last few days.

[Subaru: A room destroyed..... by whom, and why.....]

Muttering this question, Subaru suddenly realized that his thinking was somewhat ridiculous.

What was the point of asking this? It was not the kind of question that could be answered

by thinking alone, and more importantly, the problems that Subaru had to deal with were already more than his arms could hold.

He mustn't allow himself to be weighed down by small matters in between the large, which would only serve to hasten his collapse. Above all, the very act of distracting his attention away was nothing more than desperately dragging out the unbearable agony of the time before his impending suicide.

But, even recognizing this unopposable sense of “Shame”, Subaru could not pull himself away from the strangeness of this room. At this point, there was something very important right in front of him——

[Subaru: ————]

Guided by an inexplicable certainty, Subaru felt his way forward, turning his head about, searching for the room's exit. Since he was brought here by “Door Crossing, this room must have a closeable door that tossed him out.

At last, Subaru found the door that had so rudely dropped him off—— a small flap installed on the upper part of the wall, perhaps used for ventilation or the likes.

Other than that, he could see nothing else that could be considered an exit. The official door might be on the other side of the collapsed pit—— in the opposite, unreachable end of the room.

When this fact finally sank in, Subaru had to give up on the notion of leaving in any conventional way. Wiping off the sweat and the unknown slime stuck to his palms onto his pants, he held his breath as he reached his fingers towards the flap.

The flap was at a height he had to stretch up on his tiptoes to reach, and its size would be closest to a garbage disposal chute. Although it wasn't too narrow for a person to pass through, it wasn't so luxurious that Subaru could fit through easily.

After some struggling owing to his maimed right hand, the rusted flap creaked open, and the effort to maneuver his body into the narrow tunnel began. The tunnel was the width of a ventilation pipe. In the worst case, he imagined it'd be a paradise for insect and rats, but

it turned out to be surprisingly clean—— or, not exactly, but at least the fact that the dusty passage was free of living critters was a saving grace.

It took about three minutes before he passed through the tunnel. He got used to the crawling about halfway through, and just as his movements started getting smooth, he found himself at the finishing line. Popping out in the room connected by the ventilation tunnel, Subaru jumped down in the same manner, and started looking over his surroundings. He took the greatest caution to make sure there wasn't another pit here, but,

[Subaru: It's got a different vibe from the previous one. Compared to the one that looked like a lab this one's more like a waiting room]

Only about a half of a half of the size of the previous room, it appeared to be a room whose sole purpose was to be passed through. Other than two walk-through-on-the-ground type of doors, there was nothing else in the room. Certainly, it was a waiting room-esque room.

It'd be perfect if there was a coffee table with some magazines stacked on it——

[Subaru: Judging by the direction I came from, the other side of this door would be..... yeah]

Turning the knob and pushing open the door, he was greeted by the collapsed pit in front of his eyes. Seeing this death-trap situation, Subaru spilled a small sigh and closed the door again for the sake of his mental health. ——And, smelling the putrid stench seeping into this room, he kicked himself for not being quicker with his decision.

Then, quietly turning around, this time he faced the opposite door. Behind that door, would be a space completely unknown to Subaru——

[Subaru:hg]

The sweat on his palm that was supposed to have been wiped off and the cold sweat dripping down his back became unbearable.

Since he didn't know what was beyond that door, he could only imagine and prepare for the worst.

[Subaru: If..... this is inside the Mansion, then.....]

Although it could just be another room he had never seen before, it was also possible that the moment he opened this door, he would find Elsa on the other side. If he did come face to face with that murderer, Subaru was not so confident that he'd be able to stay calm. Even the impulse of "You Need To Die Immediately" insisting on his suicide could not help but transform into teeth-shattering hatred at that reminder.

Just the thought that the deviant whose blade killed Petra, Frederica—— and Rem, might be there tormented Subaru's mind with rage surging to a boil.

Like a curse, a part of him wished that she was there, while a pathetic craving for life hoped that she was not. Wavering between the two extremes, Subaru's mouth contorted into a wicked grin,

[Subaru:————]

Whether she's there, or not there, this deranged emotion would not be betrayed.

At the end of his thoughts' departure from sanity, faced with the world that opened before him,

[Subaru: ————ah]

Witnessing a sight that should not be there, Subaru lost himself in that moment.

——Subaru's mind had actually already reached an answer about where this unfamiliar space was.

In the first place, there was barely a single room in Roswaal's Mansion where Subaru hadn't set foot in, and he even had free access to the Forbidden Library in a sense—— so all that was left was the door which he had only touched twice, but never got to see the other side of. That is, the door inside the "Escape Passage".

The first time, he was hindered by a spirit with gray fur, and the second time, he was

chased away by a murdering maniac. So Subaru was never able to pass beyond that point.

And that was why, despite harboring a certain sense of distrust towards whatever was waiting beyond this room, he did not have any doubts that it would be a part of Roswaal's Mansion, but,

[Subaru: Where is..... this?]

Stumped, he muttered this question stupidly at no one in particular.

Beyond the opened door, what panned out directly in front of Subaru was a cold, dark underground passage—— or not. Rather, it was a luscious green forest in the midst of vibrant nature, and what was even stranger, was that,

[Subaru: It's, morning.....?]

Gazing up towards the sky through the gaps between the trees, he saw the rising sun. Seeing the height of the sun, and the sensation of the morning wind blowing against his skin, Subaru's mind was further racked by doubt.

By the time Subaru returned to the Mansion, it was already right before dusk. Counting the time spent in his conversation with Frederica, along with Elsa's attack, Subaru would have been wounded just before midnight—— which would mean that, at this point, half a day had already passed.

[Subaru: While I was unconscious.....!?!]

As soon as he bit down on his tongue to commit suicide, Subaru fell unconscious. When he woke again, his wounds had been healed and he was so preoccupied with his failure to kill himself that he had forgotten to consider how much time had passed. Just how long had Subaru spent unconscious in the Library?

He remembered Beatrice calling it "A Place Detached From The Passage Of Time". And while Subaru wasn't sure just how literal that was meant to be,

[Subaru: If the savepoint gets overwritten because of this.....!]

That would be an unthinkable situation.

Before his worst fear comes to pass and the state of reality is overwritten, he must immediately end his own life. And yet, another feeling was asserting its existence in direct conflict with this anxiety. That feeling was screaming:

——You must find out where this place is.

He didn't know what would be the purpose of doing so. Considering all that had happened so far, and the malicious nature of Return By Death, he knew he should kill himself now. But there was a horrifying calmness within Subaru that insisted this, despite fully understanding the circumstances he found himself in.

[Subaru: ——Kh, damnit!]

Kicking his foot into the ground and sending spit flying, Subaru sprinted into the forest ahead of him. Dashing through the gaps between the trees, his conversation with Petra in the escape tunnel surfaced in his mind.

The escape passage leads deep into the mountains behind the Mansion to a small cabin, where one might pick up emergency supplies and the like.

If that information can be relied on, then this should be that cabin in the mountains just now, and he would be running through the back mountains which he had already trekked though so many times before. But,

[Subaru: Was that the cabin? Where were the supply bags? And, in the first place..... looking like it's been abandoned for ages, what kind of disaster relief infrastructure is that..... !?]

That strange place that Subaru saw contained more than enough evidence to support his sense of foreboding. There were too few similarities that actually matched Petra's description. More importantly, if Frederica and Rem had been periodically maintaining it, there would be no explanation for the horrendous state of disrepair. This was something Subaru could say with confidence, knowing the work ethics of those two maids.

Passing through the forest, there was now another question, which would be the lack of a slope. The cabin was supposed to be in the mountains, but was it built somewhere without the slightest change in elevation for a hundred meters or more? Losing track of where he was, Subaru was racked by frustration for failing to see what he was trying to see.

Then, when his frustration and doubt had reached their limits, they were quickly and unexpectedly shattered.

Where the trees opened up, suddenly clearing his line of sight, Subaru skidded to a stop. The pavement, if it could still be called pavement in spite of the ragged condition it was in, was evidence that there were people frequently passing through here. And, more importantly, the rows of houses visible in the distance further indicated that there were people living on this land.

Taking this into his eyes, Subaru's thoughts were taken hostage by shock in the truest sense of the phrase.

Because the scenery he saw was——

[Subaru: The, S-Sanctuary!?!]

The place he had bid farewell to only half a day ago, and which by his estimation would require a whole day to return to.

He lifted his right hand in accordance with his horror. His fingers were still missing. Lost. Return by Death had not been activated. And yet, he was now standing in a place he did not belong.

[Subaru: Why..... am I here? Was it... Door Crossing.....?]

There could be no other answer.

After being kicked out of the Mansion's Forbidden Library by Beatrice, Subaru had been sent to a corner of the Sanctuary through Door Crossing. But how did this happen?

[Subaru: Is distance..... irrelevant? Yes, that one time I got transported from the Mansion to an animal stall in the village, but.....]

Thinking in terms of distance, even that was still within permissible range. But considering the distance from the Mansion to the Sanctuary, this kind of long distance transportation was, to put it simply, beyond imagination and common sense.

Yet, considering the overabundance of supernatural powers he had witnessed so far, Subaru didn't have much choice except to scratch his head and swallow it down.

[Subaru: Screw it! If I'm back in the Sanctuary then.....ROSWAAL!!]

Sprint forth to that clown's location and make him spit out every single one of his intentions.

Roswaal had always treated Beatrice cordially at the Mansion. That sorcerer must certainly know her origins and how she came to possess a Gospel.

If he knows but tries to toy with the ignorant Subaru, that will be fine as well. Even if he has to punch his nose in, burn him, rip him apart, and bite out his throat, he'd do it until that clown spills everything.

[Subaru: ————!]

At this moment, completely forgetting the need to kill himself, Subaru started to run. His thoughts dyed red with the pure color of rage, he dashed to the edge of the forest, to the residence where Roswaal would be sleeping.

Transforming into an incarnation of Wrath, Subaru sped through the Sanctuary, forgetting his exhaustion and agony, drawn only towards his destination.

Kicking the door open with the same momentum, Subaru pushed into the house, baring his teeth,

[Subaru: ROSWAAL! SHOW YOUR FACE! THERE'S A MOUNTAIN OF THINGS I WANNA ASK YOU!]

Plunging forward violently in a way that would normally earn him a scolding from a maid, Subaru barked out his demands. Hearing no reply coming from the room, Subaru stomped forward with deafening steps and wrung the final door open,

[Subaru: No more playing dumb and no more lies. Start spilling everything you've been hiding and.....]

As he was about to go on, Subaru's voice trailed off.

Because, not only was the target of his condensed dissatisfaction absent, there was no one in the room to listen.

Gone. This fact only sent more boiling rage churning through Subaru's mind. Kicking the bed as hard as he could, the pain on his toes only escalated his anger further as he stormed out of the house.

In that case, Roswaal must be at Lewes' house—— meeting with Emilia, or perhaps discussing something with Lewes and Garfiel. Either way, becoming so active the moment Subaru was out of the picture, he certainly had the audacity. His timing to get up and running was so perfect, one might even suspect whether he had been faking it all this time.

As soon as suspicion was set on its course, negativity spiraled without interruption. With this completely dominating his thoughts, Subaru glared with sharpened eyes into the Sanctuary—— and, once again, realized too late.

[Subaru:Ah?]

It was early morning. As far as Subaru knew, that should be when the residents of the Sanctuary would begin preparing breakfast and washing themselves. Now that the refugees were gone, there was no need to cook mass meals, but each of the families would still need to cook.

They should, but there were no signs of such daily activities in sight. Rather, even before that,

[Subaru: It's not just Roswaal..... where did everyone else go?]

Looking left and right, there was not a single person in sight.

Come to think of it, from the moment he left the forest and returned to the Sanctuary, he

couldn't recall having run into, or seen anyone on the way.

Even if he considered how there weren't that many residents in the Sanctuary, to not bump into a single person in the dead center of the village was too improbable to ignore.

[Subaru: There's no way.....]

Shaking his head and trying to cast aside the nauseating sense of foreboding, Subaru knocked on the door of the nearest residence. He knocked, but confirming that there was no reply, he opened the door and peeked inside. ——No one.

In this house, there were supposed to be two beast-eared sisters living here.

One after another, Subaru looked inside every recognizable house, and every time his hope was betrayed, his disappointment mounted.

Everyone was missing, and there was no one here. The people of the Sanctuary had simply vanished.

[Subaru: Somebody! Anybody!? Where'd you all go!?]

The nauseating premonition accumulated.

He felt an anxiety and an inexplicable sense of loss.

During his showdown with the Witch Cult, the tragic memories of the Arlam village that welcomed Subaru, who had returned too late, resurfaced—— contorted, overlapping corpses, and innumerable faces of death in anguish and despair. Familiar faces drained of color, and Petra who would never move again.

[Subaru: ———Aaaaagh!]

With terror coursing up Subaru's back, the endless unease pushed him into a dash. A sound like a shriek escaped from his throat as he sped towards one singular place.

A one-of-a-kind building at the edge of the Sanctuary, a symbol of respect towards the matriarch of the village, and a place now lent to a single girl for her to place her bed.

[Subaru: ——Emilia!!]

Sprinting in while calling the name of the lovely girl, Subaru scanned the room.

A silver-haired girl with sleepy eyes looking back at Subaru, blinking several times with a surprised expression, saying [Good morning, Subaru] with a smile that made his chest ache——

[Subaru:————]

In the place where she should be looking back at him, there was no one at all.

Running over to the bed, he touched his fingers to the disheveled sheets. There was no warmth, and whoever slept here had already left for a considerable amount of time.

Having made sure of this, Subaru dashed out of the house and directed his legs towards the final place he could go. The only place that could grant him an answer to this absurd, unreasonable senselessness.

[Subaru: Hahh.....hahh.....!]

Out of breath. Tasting blood in the back of his throat, Subaru arrived at the very end of the Sanctuary, at the Tomb in which the Witch of Greed, Echidona, was sleeping.

There was no Garfiel, sitting in the middle of the road, obstructing him. Nor was he in front of the Tomb, waiting for him. Was that a blessing, or would he rather have been blocked just so he could see a familiar face——?

[Subaru: No..... how could I even face him.....]

As the one who couldn't save his only sister, how could he bring himself to see him as though nothing had happened?

The relief Subaru felt at his absence, in spite of the unbearable anxiety of being unable to find anyone, and the way he was glossing over his own weakness, was truly grotesque.

Shaking his head to cast off such sentiments, Subaru stepped towards the Tomb before anything could interfere.

It was not time to initiate the Trial, but perhaps some action would be taken on the Witch's

side. Hoping this, and clinging to this hope, Subaru sought the Witch who might give answers to his questions——

[Subaru: ——Kh, hhu]

The moment he stepped forward, Subaru received a feeling as though something had passed through his body.

He slowly looked down. Under his chest, and above his lower abdomen, in the dead center of his torso—— there was a round, gaping hole the size of a fist.

[Subaru: Fff.....ehh?]

Reaching out his hand, he tried to cover over the hole. A loud noise accompanied the massive volume of blood exploding out from the gap. Despite stuffing his palm over the opening, the hole penetrated all the way through his body and was still open on the back side. Unable to plug both sides at once, and having lost so much blood, his body could not even maintain its current posture and toppled to the ground.

——No, pain. Can't, understand. What, happened?

Death. Dying. Going to die. At least, it's certain that death was coming.

How, why, why here? Elsa? She tracked him this far? The distance between the Mansion and the Sanctuary... Beatrice, impossible. Gospel? Her, why? Rem... Who was it. Dying. Scared. What. Who. Emilia. Witch. Witch. Witc——

[Subaru: ————a]

His vision began to haze. The end was approaching.

His anticipated death came in an unanticipated form. Subaru felt no relief that he was finally dying. Only, just briefly, he was afraid of death.

Even if he claimed to have resolved to die, death came to him in a different way than he had envisioned. His heart was thrown into disarray, his pathetic desire for life screamed, while his soul refused to be peeled away from this world—— yet, “Death” was slowly eroding Subaru,

[Subaru: ——so...weak]

His own powerlessness streaming down his useless cheeks, Subaru's heart stopped beating.

His long-awaited death having arrived in this unexpected form, his lifeless face contorted in anguish and horror. The wretchedness of this death would be disputed by no one.

[???: ———Kch]

With that sound, he was chewed.

Chapter 37 [The Initial Impulse To Kill]

He heard a sound like the torrent of a rushing stream.

A furious sound of water. A foaming waterfall coursing downwards, pulled along by gravity and current.

Reverberating in his ears, or perhaps within his skull, the thunderous roar rumbled at Subaru's brain as his consciousness was guided from loss into wakefulness.

He saw a light, and——

[Subaru: ——ah, khu]

Sensing something clogging his throat, the rhythm of Subaru's breaths grew bewildered as he gagged for air.

Inhale, exhale, the regular intervals between his breaths turned vague. His oxygen-deprived body spasmed and shook, saliva drooled from his mouth as Subaru wrung open his eyes.

[Subaru: Khu, aghk!]

His face was pressed against the ground. Pushing himself off the surface and onto his elbows and knees, Subaru grasped his chest, panting, and tried to calm his aching lungs. The pain fell away, and he spat out the saliva that had nowhere else to go. With his body settling as oxygen resaturated his brain, he took a breath. ——And began to remember.

[Subaru: uuUUAH, AAAAH!?!]

Recalling the gaping hole that had been opened in his chest, he felt the sense of emptiness of all the contents of his body flooding out.

Quickly pressing his palm over his stomach, he confirmed the absence of the gap that was the source of that emptiness, and the tension of his body began to soften.

Tasting a numbing shock through his limbs, Subaru scraped his forehead against the ground as the friction and the abrasive pain affirmed the reality of his existence.

[Subaru: What was, that..... at the end.....]

Face-down on the ground, blood draining from his body, the sensation of his soul being sucked out from that very same gap certainly existed. But that wasn't the source of the sense of loss eroding at Subaru's flesh. The true horror came afterwards, near the end, among the lingering embers of life being guided into death.

His consciousness was vague and his memories were blurred, but this alone he remembered clearly.

——Something, something unknown, was “Devouring” him.

[Subaru: C-cut down, beaten to death, frozen, falling to death, I've died all sorts of ways now..... b-but this is still the first time I've been ea..... eaten in the end.....]

Recounting the conscious experience of what happened to his body in the end, Subaru was once more gripped by terror.

The direct cause of death was the loss of blood spilling from the gap, and he had no intentions of making light of “Death” itself, but he had nonetheless experienced first hand a fragment of the possibility that “Death” was not the end.

Who knew that the sensation of his body being eaten would be accompanied by such intense sense of loss? Subaru had lost fingers and legs before, but this sickening sensation was far beyond all of them——

[Subaru: fingers.....!?!]

Coming to that thought, Subaru suddenly wanted to kick himself for being so slow to remember.

Considering the unsurvivable wound he sustained and the unmistakable sensation of “Death”, there was no doubt that Return by Death had been activated. There was no entity in this world that had more profound knowledge of death than Natsuki Subaru. He died, and he returned, that much was certain.

What was not certain, was where on the timeline Subaru returned to.

If his restart point had been moved to an unsalvageable point in time, where would Subaru's resolve and oaths lead him then——

[Subaru: ah.....]

Scanning his bloodshot eyes over his surroundings, Subaru desperately tried to confirm the time and his current location. But what calmed this desperate panic was the sensation on his forehead while his fingers wiped the sweat off his brows. ——The three missing fingers on his right hand were definitely still there.

[Subaru: Fingers..... are still there, which means]

As if to make sure, he held up his right arm and ran his gaze from his fingers to his elbow. Fingers and wrist, all the way to the elbow, nothing was missing, nor were there any signs of scarring. The white scars left over from the disturbance of the Wolgarms were still there, but that's a different story.

Having confirmed that his arm was fine, Subaru moved on to his shoulder and hip—— the spots where Elsa's darts had dug into. Sensing no stiffness in his skin, Subaru almost collapsed from sheer relief, finally convinced that he had returned to a time before his encounter with Elsa.

[Subaru: Th..... then, for now...]

It was fortune in midst of misfortune that he wasn't given anything worse than death. Feeling relieved and drained, Subaru dropped his eyes and thanked his bad luck. And it was then when he turned his gaze to the side, and noticed.

——That in the corner of the dark room, there was Emilia, writhing in pain.

[Subaru: Emili.....a]

Instantly rushing over to her side, Subaru realized that they were alone in a dark and musty vault. He had only one experience of being alone with her like this, so there was only one possible explanation. That is,

[Subaru: The restart point... hasn't changed.....!]

Inside the Tomb, directly after passing the Trial—— was where Subaru returned to after death. In exchange for nothing being gained, nothing was lost either. Time to try again.

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——There must be something he could do to fix everything.

Having confirmed where he had returned to, the thought that passed through Subaru's mind was so positive that it was hard to believe it could have come from a person who had just been trembling in his final moments.

It was now the second night after his arrival in the Sanctuary. With the information gained from the first loop and second loop, Subaru reorganized the circumstances and events in his mind as he set about searching for the solution.

By now, the bloody content was already nothing out of the ordinary. Whether it was the initial cluelessness, or becoming hopelessly stuck with no choice but to hug his own head, it was just the same thing all over again.

[Subaru: Although... the usual methods won't be working this time]

No matter what, Subaru still wasn't able to grasp the full story of this loop. And even against the clear and obvious threats, he couldn't see any effective countermeasures. Currently, there was no way to oppose the combat strength of the obvious threat, Elsa. With no exploitable weaknesses, the degree of danger she posed may have surpassed even Petelgeuse.

Countering her attack on the Mansion remained the foremost priority. However, it would seem the problems didn't end there,

[Subaru: Last time, near the end..... why was the Sanctuary empty.....?]

He couldn't understand why Beatrice would transport him all the way to the Sanctuary, but the fact that everyone there had vanished was all the more incomprehensible. He recalled running all around, shouting, only to receive no reply in return.

And then, there was the final calamity which befell Subaru when he tried to seek the answers inside the Tomb.

With a hole opened in his chest, Subaru died without the slightest idea of what could have given him that wound. The memory of that still-vivid injury brought back nothing but pain and horror, without a single clue or answer.

Back there, what on earth happened in the Sanctuary? What happened to Subaru? What was Beatrice thinking? And Emilia——

[Subaru:impossible]

Coming to that point, suddenly struck by the contradiction between his thoughts and his behavior, Subaru's face stiffened.

It was important to organize the situation. It was also important to set goals for the future and draw up plans to realize them. And it was a priority to collect the scattered information and shape them into something useful for obtaining that longed-for future, but,

[Subaru: ————]

Did that give him an excuse to forget Emilia, currently struggling against a nightmare right in front of his eyes?

[Subaru: I-I...]

Emilia was still inside the Trial, tormented by agony. Her body and soul, assaulted by her past, being chipped away by the excruciating pain of the weight of the cross she had to bear.

Long lasting pain without the slightest consolation at its end.

Subaru knew: How much sorrow this was bringing her, how much it was wearing her down, and how much it was weakening her heart.

It was because he couldn't bear to see her like this that he had resolved to complete the Trial in her place, to clear away all obstacles, and open the way for her to pass.

That was how it should have been, so why was Subaru so relieved to see her suffering?

"Thank god he returned to a point in time where she was suffering." Despite knowing what will become of her pain, he had cruelly put his thoughts before her.

The moment he understood this, Subaru saw the hideous existence he had descended into.

Even knowing that the girl in front of his eyes, the person most important to him in this world, was gasping in unbearable agony, he was averting his eyes from her distress, fully absorbed in his self-centered foolishness.

To Subaru, such weakness was abhorrent and grotesque.

[Subaru: Either way.....]

There was no time to be tormented by guilt and the contradictions of his heart. He must wake Emilia up right away, and bring her out of this place.

He could take the time to gather his thoughts once they're outside. There was no reason to prolong her suffering. And——

[Subaru: Right now, there's a guy I need to get some answers out of]

It was starting to piss him off how lenient he was before. How is it that all this time, he had allowed the central character at the core of everything to get away with his ambiguities? The result was the tragedy that befell the Mansion, and his incomprehensible death at the Sanctuary.

If that was the future that came from Subaru's cowardice, then——

[Subaru: I will do everything differently this time]

As these words rolled off of his tongue, Subaru reached out his hand to wake Emilia. In that moment, not even Subaru himself was aware that his face was being contorted by unsuppressible fury.

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[Subaru: ——Just how much do you know, Roswaal?]

That was the first thing that came out of Subaru's mouth as he swung open the door. Lying on the bed, Roswaal narrowed his eyes. And Subaru, seeing himself reflected in those mismatched pupils, barged into the room and slammed the door shut behind him in a display of his present emotion.

——After finally calming Emilia and bringing her out of the Tomb, Subaru headed to Lewes' house and put her to bed. There, he left Emilia in Ram's care, and, so as to not waste the interval before she wakes again, he immediately set out for the building where Roswaal was recuperating.

Garfiel's silent glare all that time he was in the house gave him cause for concern, but fortunately, Subaru didn't encounter any resistance on the way and managed to get there without any problems.

However, the instant he took Roswaal into his sights, all that caution scattered like a mist.

[Roswaal: Fu~~mu]

Looking up at the restless Subaru, Roswaal let out a deep and meaningful sigh. And then, he held up a single finger and lightly wagged it in front of Subaru.

[Roswaal: M~~y you certainly seem much more a~~ngry than last I saw you. Tha~~t's a good sign]

[Subaru: Don't try to be funny. I'm not in the mood for pranks or jokes right now. I'm prepared to use force if I have to]

Snarling this at the carefree Roswaal, Subaru advanced to the side of the bed and pressed his palms onto the sheets. And, glaring down at the clown at extreme close-range,

[Subaru: I just came back from taking the Trial. ——And I have a mountain of things to ask you]

[Roswaal:Is that, so. You have taken the Trial. I see. I see. I~~ see~~]

Whereas in Subaru's time, several days had already passed since the Trial where he bid farewell to his parents, in real time, it would only have been less than an hour ago. And, it was now the third time he had seen Roswaal's inexplicable reactions to being told about the Trial.

The first time, there seemed to be a flash of violent emotion so brief it was as if it was never there. The second time, he appeared to have somewhat calmly accepted the fact. But even so, it was laced with a certain uncharacteristic tinge of melancholy.

And this third time, what was that reaction supposed to be? Personally, Subaru had hoped for a flash of anger like the first time, believing that if Roswaal could be incited into a rage, he might just let his mouth slip.

But, completely contrary to Subaru's hopes, Roswaal's lips instead curved into a smile,

[Roswaal: I~~n that case, allow me to ask you a question]

[Subaru: Huh? What are you talking about? You? Ask questions?If you keep playing around I'm going to seriously flip, you bastard]

[Roswaal: I can understand that you have re~~ason to be angry. And I am asking with that in mind. If we are of the same opinion..... I don't see why you would decli~~ne to coo~~perate]

[Subaru: If I answer your question..... no, wait]

While Subaru was trying to press down his anger, Roswaal raised this proposal. For a moment, Subaru almost accepted. But he instantly severed that thought when he realized that accepting would have meant being swept along by the atmosphere created by Roswaal, just like all those times before.

Unless he made an effort to resist, the result will be just as miserable. So in order to change the outcome, he must change his behavior from this point onward.

[Subaru: I'm not answering your questions. I'm the one who has questions. I go first]

[Roswaal:Aya, bu~~t isn't that aw~~fully rude?]

[Subaru: I'm not saying I won't answer any questions, but I have the feeling we won't get anywhere if I just go along with whatever you say. So let's nip that in the bud first]

Seeing Subaru's obstinate attitude, Roswaal closed a single eye and lightly sighed. Then, holding out both palms, he made an [A~~lright] gesture,

[Roswaal: Ask whatever you li~~ke. Indeed, it doesn't always have to be me managing the pa~~ce of the conversation]

[Subaru: Even though it's actually kinda creepy when you're so reasonable..... well, no point getting hung up on that. So, question: ——What kind of contract have you sealed with Beatrice?]

[Roswaal: ————]

Suddenly silent, it seemed as though Roswaal was caught off guard by that query.

Seeing his cheeks stiffen, albeit slightly, Subaru was convinced that he had struck a critical question.

The previous loop had brought about newly-discovered facts and unexplained events, and Subaru must set about finding the answers to these mysteries. Foremost among them——

were the questions surrounding Beatrice, and whether it was at the Sanctuary or the Mansion, the only person he could ask was Roswaal.

More than anything, their conversation at their parting and the Gospel in her hands were all burned into his mind, impossible to forget.

It was a question he must not take lightly. One which will decide how he will interact with that girl from now on.

——How he will face Beatrice at their unavoidable meeting in this loop.

[Subaru: Answer me, Roswaal. Don't give me any of that "You won't answer mine so I won't answer yours" crap. Answer the question]

Growing impatient with Roswaal's prolonged silence, Subaru repeated his demand for a response.

Asserting its presence within his chest was the frustration that was the manifestation of his desire to overturn that revolting sense of foreboding.

Every second of silence felt like minutes as he waited for the reply. Until, at last, Roswaal opened his mouth,

[Roswaal: ——The fact that you are asking this question here, does that mean you've remembered?]

But, instead of an answer as Subaru had hoped, Roswaal replied with a question of his own. Clicking his tongue in frustration at his attitude, [Shut up!], Subaru swung his arm in front of Roswaal,

[Subaru: Why are you replying with another question? Even if I take a hundred steps back and let you ask, you will answer mine first. I'm not giving up my turn]

[Roswaal: Is that so. Then, let's proceed by taking turns. Your question was about "The contract between Beatrice and myself", wa~~s it not? There is no contract sealed between Beatrice and myself. That is the answer]

[Subaru: Wh——!?!]

Caught off guard by that sudden turn, Subaru found himself speechless. Reaching out a hand to Subaru, who had inadvertently lost his words, [No~~w], Roswaal went on,

[Roswaal: This time it's your turn to answer m~~y question. ——Have you remembered?]

[Subaru:Remember, what. Just so you know, our relationship isn't deep enough that we can communicate by telepathy here. Don't go assuming I can put together your sentences without a subject]

[Roswaal: That reply, already gave me the answer to my question.Unfortunate]

Although Subaru had hoped to get some kind of revenge, it would seem he was no match for Roswaal after all. With a certain shade of sadness, Roswaal turned down his eyes, and,

[Roswaal: It seems, I didn't make it]

[Subaru:what]

[Roswaal: It's your turn to ask. Do be~~tter this time, and ask me a question I ca~~nnot dodge]

Covering over Subaru's confounded voice, Roswaal's self-awareness about his question dodging didn't make it any less infuriating. Subaru took a deep breath to control his emotions, and pressed a finger to his temple and began to think,

[Subaru: You said you have no contractual relationship with Beatrice, right? Then, why is Beatrice living in your Mansion? I can't understand what your relationship with Beatrice is supposed to be]

[Roswaal: That's two questions now. You've been inquiring about Beatrice e~ver since you got here, whe~re does that leave Emilia-sama? Or, could it be that you prefer those who look like young children?]

[Subaru: I'm not attracted to little kids and I have no intention of going the romantic conquest route with her. But I do intend to shake up the status quo a bit, so I'll be choosing her route in that sense]

It was true, that whenever he thought about Beatrice, Subaru would feel a certain aching in his heart.

But this was different from the aching he'd feel when he thought of Emilia or Rem, and Subaru quite couldn't understand what it meant.

Except, even after seeing the Gospel in Beatrice's hands, he still felt this.

——And he didn't want to believe that the relationship between him and Beatrice was just something counterfeit written in some strange book.

[Subaru: That's why I need to find out more about her. And it seems the only person who's deeply associated with her is you. So I can only ask you]

[Roswaal: You try to collect everything that ca~tches your eye, but it will only become an obstacle when the time comes to choose what is truly impo~rtant. Such naivete only hinders you from seeing the thing that is most important to your heart, I thi~nk]

[Subaru: I realize my hands are already full. So now I'm just trying to grab her with my mouth. Got a problem with that?]

[Roswaal: How could I po~ssibly? Although I get the feeling you are just saying that for appearances sake, there is nothing wrong with that. ——In fact, I do wonder how you will answer when the time comes]

Acknowledging Subaru's words, Roswaal's voice trailed to an indiscernible whisper towards the end. Subaru's gaze sharpened at those words, and, receiving that gaze, Roswaal continued, [In tha~~t case],

[Roswaal: The reason why Beatrice resides in the Mansion, wa~~s it? She resides in my Mansion due to her ties with the House of Mathers. If you must know, it was by the favor of the head of the House of Mathers many generations ago that she became the Keeper of the Forbidden Library. It has been so through the generations, and remains the same, now it that had passed to me]

[Subaru: Employed as its Keeper?Then, how is that any different from a contract?]

[Roswaal: The questioning format seems to be a bit different from what we've agreed?We~~ll, no matter. There i~~s already little meaning in asking any more questions from my side. You are already aware of Beatrice's identity as a spirit, I assu~~me?]

Subaru nodded in affirmation to Roswaal's question. Although he never actually got to see Beatrice's spirit-form, her self proclamation and her intimidating presence both confirmed this fact.

Seeing Subaru's nod, Roswaal lifted up a finger,

[Roswaal: To spirits, a contract with a human carries tremendous significance. The relationship between Emilia-sama and the Great Spirit-sama is exa~ctly that]

[Subaru:Yeah, Emilia's been struggling with all the annoying conditions too. But the Great Spirit-sama hasn't been showing his face lately, has he]

Having been killed by Puck three times, and after their clash of perspectives over the sleeping Rem, there was an insurmountable gap between them. And since he mysteriously went into hiding before that gap could be resolved, Subaru's feelings towards that little cat was still rather hard to define.

[Roswaal: The Great Spirit-sama's whims aside, Beatrice is no exception. That child and I are in a cooperating relationship, to a certain extent. But it is nothing more than a sort of mutual noninterference while our interests are aligned. It would be unlikely for her to help me achieve my goals, and the same is true vice versa]

[Subaru: I can see how you can appear to be on good terms with Beako while actually being indifferent, but that has nothing to do with the terms of her contract]

[Roswaal: Ooh my, you must excuse me. But contractual relationships are something else entirely. Beatrice, being a spirit, takes contracts extremely seriously. To speak to her on the topic of contracts would be a different, and quite larger, issue. After all, that child is still bound by a contract from four hundred years ago]

Picking up something he could not let slide, Subaru suddenly leaned himself up to Roswaal shouting [That's it!]

[Subaru: That contract from four hundred years ago, I want to know the details]

[Roswaal: Spirits' mouths don't open so easily when it comes to the contents of their contracts. No involved parties from that time could possibly still remain, so unless Beatrice herself speaks, there is no one else who knows of the contents of her contract]

[Subaru: Damn it, that's useless! If I could just find out what's in that contract.....]

Then he would know why that girl was hiding herself in a room all alone, wouldn't he?

[Roswaal: However, there is one thing worth mentioning]

[Subaru: ——?]

[Roswaal: Since Beatrice is bound by the contract from four hundred years ago, to seal any new contract which overlaps with the original would be impossible. So, if you wish to bring her out of that place, then you must find a way to break the existing contract]

[Subaru: Break..... the contract?]

[Roswaal: Fulfilling it, would also work. But since there is good chance that the other party to the contract is already gone, breaking the contract would be the smarter course, don't you think?]

It was nothing short of miraculous that Roswaal would be offering constructive opinions for a change. Initially caught off guard by his words, Subaru's expression abruptly changed as though a veil was suddenly lifted from his eyes,

[Subaru: ——When did I ever say I wanted to bring Beatrice outside?]

Subaru, saying this quietly, fixed sharpened eyes on Roswaal, mere inches away. Placing his hands on the bed, his fingers began knocking on the sheets like the second-hand of a clock. Dropping his gaze to look at this gesture, Roswaal closed a single eye, before reflecting Subaru within his sole yellow pupil,

[Roswaal: You really—— are a man who likes to notice things people don't want you to notice]

[Subaru: What do you.....]

[Roswaal: Either way, this time is already meaningless to me. Perhaps, we should end this conversation here?]

[Subaru: Are—— are you fucking kidding me!?!]

Different from before, within Roswaal's eyes, there emerged a color of disappointment. With that strange expression, Roswaal spilled out a sigh from a face seemingly drained of all liveliness.

[Roswaal: No matter what you say now, it could no longer move me..... so you may do whatever you like]

[Subaru: You've got to be joking!? This is important..... we are getting to something important and you start acting like that!? There are still things I need to ask you.....]

[Roswaal: If you wish to ask, you are free to ask. But whether I answer them seriously or not, would depend completely on whether I feel like it]

The more agitated Subaru became, the more deprived of the tremors of emotion Roswaal seemed to become. In front of Subaru, whose face had turned red with rage, Roswaal merely combed his fingers through his deep blue hair, and tilted his head,

[Roswaal: You have, no more questions?]

[Subaru: ——Tch. Alright, I know that Beatrice is bound by a contract and is living inside the Mansion. We can leave the details for now. There's something else I want to ask. About that black book she has..... I want you to tell me what that is]

[Roswaal: E~hh, you saw it? Any thoughts? What do you think it is?]

[Subaru: Don't reply with another question. ——But I think it's... something similar... to the books the Witch Cultists have, or, at least, I'm guessing]

Subaru's stuttered reply was like a plea for the words to be refuted. But, hearing this, Roswaal showed an expression as if he couldn't hold back a yawn,

[Roswaal: The Gospels in the Witch Cultists' possession are mediums of the Witch's will, and describe the path leading to their owners' desired future. Well, aside from vague directions, they are rather labor-intensive to follow as far as prophetic books go]

[Subaru: ——! You know?]

[Roswaal: There is no need to be too surprised. There are Witch Cultists here as well, considering this is a facility belonging to a Witch different from the Witch they worship.

Being the manager of the Sanctuary, it wasn't just once or twice that I've had to exchange blows with the li~kes of them]

[Subaru: Th-then, they can really see the future.....?]

If they could see the future without dying, that would be an ability far more powerful than Subaru's Return by Death. It was not that he was jealous of such an ability, but if all the members of the Witch Cult were equipped with this overpowered item, that would be nothing to scoff at.

But, seeing Subaru's shudder, Roswaal shook his head,

[Roswaal: It's not that convenient of an item. First of all, the number of entries themselves vary from Cultist to Cultist. The contents are vague and subject to interpretation. More importantly, no one except the owner of the Gospel can read it. To anyone else, its contents will only appear to be indecipherable nonsense. And so, they are only incomplete maps of the future]

[Subaru: Incomplete.....]

Subaru couldn't hide his relief to hear this. But then again, if the Gospels were truly prophetic books with the power to describe the future, Subaru would never have been able to win against Petelgeuse. In that sense, it's obvious that even the Sin Archbishops' Gospels couldn't have reached that level. However,

[Subaru: That'd be a completely different topic. Then, what about Beatrice's book.....]

[Roswaal: If you're asking whether it is the same as the ones in the Witch Cultists' possession, then the answer is that it is, and it isn't]

[Subaru: Stop playing around! This is important!]

[Roswaal: I am doing no~~ such thing. Although what Beatrice has is a Gospel, it is of a different origin from the Witch Cultists'. For the Witch Cultists' Gospels are incomplete, whereas the one belonging to Beatrice is complete]

[Subaru: Complete.....?]

[Roswaal: Yes, it is complete. Unlike the defective items that fluctuate between uncertain futures, wavering in their recorded contents]

Seeing Subaru confused, Roswaal's face only brightened.

His expression and tone were as if he was basking in pride. Subaru didn't know what to say in front of this sudden transformation, but what made him lose his words in the truest sense of the phrase, was what came afterwards,

[Subaru: ——!?!]

Roswaal reached behind with his right hand and produced a book with black binding.

There was no mistaking it at such a close distance that it was, without a doubt, a Gospel.

[Roswaal: This is one of the only two complete Gospels in existence. Myself, and Beatrice, are the only two people who possess one..... tha~t is]

[Subaru: ————]

Before Subaru's eyes, Roswaal waved the book left and right in his hand. However, Subaru had no mental capacity to care about such gestures now.

The fact that Roswaal was holding a Gospel same as the ones in the hands of the Witch Cult was indeed shocking. The fact that the one in Beatrice's hand was also a Gospel, and the fact that the words she said to him at their parting were confirmed, was also shocking. ——But they were not what dominated Subaru's mind in that moment,

[Subaru: That's..... a Gospel that records the future?]

[Roswaal: Wi~~thout a doubt. This is the genuine Gospel]

[Subaru: You know..... the future? Right now, everything that is happening now... is in that book.....?]

[Roswaal: It i~s written. Although you won't be able to read it]

Who cares about that.

At this moment, whether Subaru could read it is irrelevant. There was only one significance. Only one single thing he had to ask. That is,

[Subaru: The future, what will happen..... is written... in that book?]

[Roswaal: It doesn't describe the enti~rety of the world, but it does reveal a portion of the owner's fu~ture]

[Subaru: That things will become the way they are now..... you knew that beforehand?]

[Roswaal: It took quite a lot of effort to produce the same situ~ation as described, you know? I was rather hoping for a little praise for all my efforts behind the sce~nes]

Subaru could not stop his voice from trembling.

At the source of that trembling, was the seeping of some violent emotion. Just what that emotion was, and at whom it was directed, was immediately obvious—— that is,

[Subaru: If you knew... everything that was going to happen.....]

[Roswaal: ——Fuumu]

[Subaru: ——You, knowingly left Rem to die?]

[Roswaal: Rem, who~ would you be refe~rring to?]

[Subaru: ——I'll KILL YOU!! ROSWAAAAAAAAAAAAAL!!]

In that instant, uncontrollable rage propelled Subaru's body to move.

Flying forward onto the bed, his hands clenched tight onto the bedridden Roswaal's neck.

With unnatural strength never seen before, Subaru's grip dug into the slender neck, carving an expression of agony onto the clown's blue and white face.

[Subaru: YOU KNEW EVERYTHING AND YOU——!!]

If he knew, if he already knew, if he could have prevented the tragedies—— and what happened to Rem from ever happening—

[Subaru: THE REASON I LEFT REM TO DIE—— WAS YOU!!?]

Consumed by overflowing fury, he blew out his regrets, and all his impulses were directed to the intent to kill this man before his eyes. His actions forgot all reason as emotions and love transmuted into force.

And, just like this, unable to utter a sound, Roswaal silently waited for Subaru's hands to snap his neck——

[???: ——I SEE "THE GUISE CAN'T COVER THE ULGARMS STENCH"!!]

——Impact.

Sensing a solid, sharp tactile sensation striking him from the side, Subaru felt the right half of his face destroyed as he was sent flying into the air.

His body slammed into an immovable wall, and fell head first onto the ground. His thoughts went blank at the sudden blow, and his body couldn't move at all.

Blood flowed from his ear and nose, and the right side of his vision was dyed absolute black. His eye may have been completely crushed.

[???: ——Ever since y'came outta the Tomb yer stench's shot up. Didn't believe it so I thought I'd watch ya, but AIN'T THIS 'XACTLY AS I THOUGHT!?!]

Footsteps. The uncouth sound crept up to his side. His body would not even permit him to crawl. Immobile, front and back, Subaru's head was pulled up,

[Garfiel: Reekin' o' the stench of the Witch, the fuck y'think yer doin'? Should I ask yer body? Oy? This place still needs that bastard. The fuck're ya try'n ta pull, YEAH!?!]

A blond youth. Garfiel. Or something. Assailed by that voice full of fury and murder, Subaru's consciousness grew distant.

Half his head, though there was no way to confirm it, seemed to have been crushed. He'll die, probably. If he died like this, that'd be about the most pathetic way to go.

If he Returned by Death while clinging onto this sordid thought, would he really still have the desire to save this place?

[Subaru: I don't, know.....Rem]

With the end of that final syllable, Subaru's consciousness descended into darkness.

Chapter 38 [Caterpillar]

——The first thing that drew on his consciousness was the continuous sound of dripping water.

Falling at equal intervals, the droplets carved out a constant rhythm, and with every beat sent into the silence of the room, Subaru's submerged consciousness was guided little by little into wakefulness.

His slumbering brain resumed its activity, and his rebooted nerves sensed the circulation of blood through his veins. Twisting his body, he tried to rise up with a groan—— but couldn't.

Dropping back onto the ground, his limbs would not listen to his commands, and he could do nothing more than to scrape his face against the cold surface of the floor. At the same time, trying to tax his recovering senses to survey his surroundings, he found that his vision was completely painted over with darkness.

——Both my eyes are blind!?

That was the immediate answer he arrived at as he confirmed his situation, but before fear could overtake him, he noticed the tight pressure binding his eyelids and abandoned that conclusion. He determined that he had been blindfolded, before realizing the strangeness of the situation.

Instead of his eyes being blinded, they had both been covered. In addition, the fact that his body couldn't move was for the same reason, because his hands and feet had been firmly tied behind his back.

There was the sensation of a slender rope wrapped around his wrists and ankles. With his hands behind his back, even if he struggled, it would be no easy task to break free.

[Subaru: Wh, what is this.....!?!]

Fortunately, he wasn't gagged, so he could still use his voice normally. But with his hands and feet literally tied, his mouth was all he had left. Truth is, whoever put Subaru in this situation probably wouldn't be amicable enough to be satisfied by small talk.

Fear began to emerge from the inexplicable situation and the absence of information on his surroundings. In midst of these interwoven emotions, Subaru held his breath and forced his thoughts to move.

Organize the current circumstances: His eyes were blindfolded. His hands and feet were bound, impossible to break loose. He still had his voice. Should he yell for help? That would only draw his captor. Was there something nearby he could use to free himself from his restraints? It would be difficult to crawl around searching like this. The right side of his head was hurting, and, the moment he placed his consciousness on it, it began to assert its existence with throbbing pain.

[Subaru: Head, hurts.....]

Becoming aware of the pain on the side of his head, Subaru remembered what had happened to him right before losing consciousness.

After Returning by Death and leaving the Tomb, Subaru confronted Roswaal with the new facts and speculations, and when he flew into a rage at Roswaal's unforgivable statements, Subaru was knocked down by Garfiel, who had been watching him.

Or rather, "knocked down" would be too much of an understatement for the overwhelming force that had crushed him. Just a restraining strike from Garfiel had broken through his skull, and it wouldn't have been surprising if he had died just like that.

[Subaru: If I died, this would be after Return by Death, but.....]

If that really was the case, Subaru's restart point should be in the Tomb right after the Trial. His soul should have been spirited to the room inside the Tomb, barely an hour before he headed to Roswaal's bedroom, as per the rules of Return by Death.

At least, Subaru's experience of being tied up and confined was only limited to that one

time he flipped over the coffee table while imitating some anime, completely pissing off his father who threw him into the storehouse as punishment.

That was a memory from way back, even before he entered elementary school, and Return by Death couldn't have returned him that far. Then, assuming the restart point hadn't changed, the next conclusion would be that he was tied up immediately after Return by Death, but that should be impossible as well. So that only left him with one conclusion——

[Subaru: I failed.. to die.....?]

Whether it was the lingering pain in his head or his current situation, it would explain all of it.

He had committed an act of unsurpassable violence against Roswaal. With that in mind, his treatment was only morally right, even if it was not something he could emotionally accept.

[??? : ——Y'sure got a grasp of yer situation quickly, yeah?]

As though he had been waiting for Subaru to come to terms with his situation, a voice descended from above. Lifting his face, even though he couldn't see a thing, Subaru turned towards the direction of the voice. If he were to guess who the other person was just from the intonation of that voice,

[Subaru: Garfiel, is it?]

[Garfiel: Got that right too. Looks like yer head's still workin', that's a relief. Guess I smacked ya a bit too hard, my'bad my'bad]

Hearing his name being called, Garfiel apologized to the blindfolded Subaru. Even though the tone of his voice didn't exactly match its apologetic content, he went on with [Who would'a thought],

[Garfiel: I was just givin' y'a lil' pat, didn't think you'd almost die from that. Heard yer Emilia-sama's Knight so I thought you'd have a bit more goin' there, but guess I overestimated ya, huh]

[Subaru: Sorry to disappoint you. My character's more of the brainy type than the physical type..... So where are we, anyway?]

Replying with a scornful quip, Subaru cut directly to the chase. Hearing this, Garfiel let out a short sigh through his nose, and,

[Garfiel: Don't worry, yer still in th'Sanctuary. But this ain't the Cathedral or th'Tomb, or one of them houses we're lendin' to the guests]

[Subaru: You've got a bondage room prepared? They say it's good to be prepared, but if you've even got this kind of facility set up..... honestly I'm kinda creeped out]

[Garfiel: Go complain to the creep who made it if y'think it's bad taste. In fact, y'get to speak to her directly, don't ya?]

Garfiel made plain his discontent, or rather a sincere sense of discomfort. As though having caught something within his words, Subaru's face frowned up,

[Subaru: Directly... what do you mean.....?]

[Garfiel: With the Witch's stench all o'er ya, don't go playin' dumb now. Y'met her inside the Tomb, didn't ya? Why else y'suddenly smell like this?]

[Subaru: Met inside the Tomb.....?]

Something in Garfiel's words was tugging at him.

The Tomb. The Trial. The person he encountered there. It was all a blank. After bidding farewell to his parents in the Trial, at the end, he went into the empty school building, and there——

[Subaru: The Witch.....!]

——He encountered the Witch of Greed, Echidona.

With the sense of incongruity that came with the filling of the void, the existence of Echidona was restored to Subaru's brain. He had already experienced this in the previous loop, so why had he forgotten it again?

Unless, it was the result of the "Condition" imposed upon him at the end of their first meeting? But the fact that Return by Death could not overcome this effect was truly astounding.

Return by Death allowed him to carry over his memories, yet he would have no countermeasures against this direct interference. In other words, every time Subaru Returns by Death, he will have forgotten Echidona, and will only begin to remember when he is reminded again.

[Subaru: Then, was this the thing that Roswaal mentioned I've forgotten.....?]

Only now, with the existence of the Witch restored, did Subaru realize this, but it was still a bit too early to draw such a conclusion. After all, despite being able to remember Echidona, he could find nothing in their conversations that would help him break through the present situation.

The way Roswaal said it, it was as though he wanted Subaru to remember "Something" which, in and of itself, would reveal Roswaal's incomprehensible intentions.

Then again, this would only make sense if he was indeed in possession of a complete Gospel.

[Garfiel: Since yer quiet all'of a sudden, should I take that as yer feelin' guilty?]

[Subaru: I'm not some highschool girl who'll die if she stops talking, so I'm just quietly thinking over a thing or two. Although a thing or two probably isn't enough at this point]

There were so many things to figure out that there wouldn't be enough cells in Subaru's brain to do it.

There was Emilia. Rem. Beatrice. —Pretty much for every name in the female lineup, Subaru will have to dig himself out of the situation . And on top of that, there was the Sanctuary, Elsa, Roswaal's true intentions, and the Gospels. And then,
[Subaru: There's Garfiel... too]

To convince him and gain his support was an indispensable element of Subaru's blueprint of the plan to save the Mansion. When it comes to repelling Elsa, there was no one else Subaru could draw on with greater combat capability. The fact that his strength could be counted on to match Elsa's was something Subaru had both witnessed with his eyes and personally experienced with his head.

[Subaru:If I'm not mistaken, I'm pretty sure I got punched or kicked until my head was crushed, but what happened to that?]

[Garfiel: Hah. Took long enough for that topic t'come up. Yer head wasn't crushed, but it sure was cavin' in a bit. It'd be a nuisance if I just let ya die like that, so y'got a bit of healin']

[Subaru: Healing..... by whom?]

[Garfiel: Well who else was there t'do it 'cept me?]

Picking up some reverberations of pride in Garfiel's voice, Subaru was at a loss for words. Who would have thought that the rough-and-brutish looking Garfiel would have studied healing magic. Still tied up, Subaru squirmed a little with his body.

[Subaru: My... head's still got it's original shape and isn't a box or pyramid, right?]

[Garfiel: Next time it gets cracked I could make it into that shape if y'want]

With a stupid sigh, having received this answer, Subaru shrunk up his shoulders and confirmed that at least his body was out of the near-death situation.

In that case, the next question would be Garfiel's intentions.

[Subaru: Since you're the one who crushed it, it'd feel kinda weird to be thanking you for healing it, but..... what was your aim in all this?]

[Garfiel: What. What kinda aim y'think I have?]

[Subaru: Considering the circumstances, from your standpoint, you made the right judgement to knock me down, so I won't complain. I completely lost my head and it was a good thing that you stopped me. That's just one of the mountain of things I don't want to say but couldn't help but want to say... if you catch my drift]

[Garfiel: That's a pretty damn complicated feelin'. It's not that I don't understand wantin' to bash that smug bastard's face in, but that'd be trouble for Granny and the others if y'do that]

It seemed that Garfiel shared Subaru's wonderful opinion of Roswaal. But since they both relied on Roswaal's existence in no small part, neither of them could put that feeling into practice.

To Subaru, Roswaal was the guarantor of his livelihood in this world, and to Garfiel and the others, he was a necessary existence as the manager of the Sanctuary.

But seeing that the first reason Garfiel mentioned was Lewes—— he must have been thinking more about the lives of the residents of the Sanctuary than about himself.

This only supported Frederica's assessment of her brother in the previous loop, that in fact, the reason he chose to remain in the Sanctuary instead of leaving with his sister was probably out of consideration for the feelings of the residents who stayed behind.

[Subaru: Because Lewes and the others are important to you, Roswaal's existence as their protector is indispensable. Without him and his Demihuman fetish, the residents trapped in the Sanctuary won't be able to continue living as they are now, huh]

[Garfiel: Don't give me that embarrassing crap like y'understand everything. Who the hell y'think would stay here for sentimental reasons? I'm here cus I can't leave the place, so.....]

[Subaru: You can't leave, even though your blood sibling Frederica could, Garf?]

It was information he had just gained from the previous loop. Playing this card, Subaru listened for any change in Garfiel's demeanor. But the intensity of the reaction far surpassed Subaru's imaginations.

[Subaru: ——t!]

There was a whistling of wind, and the next instant, a tremendous cracking boom rolled into the side of Subaru's head. The sound of air breaking apart reverberated through space, and with a stomp of his foot faster than the mind could process, the floor gave way, shattering, as the shape of the entire room contorted.

The ground bent upwards, and with a whimper, Subaru was tossed by the shockwave into the air. Unable to even brace himself, he tumbled across the solid floor, and was only forcefully stopped when he smashed into a wall ahead.

The impact on his back wrenched out all the contents of his lungs as the back of his head screamed with pain. Coughing, saliva drooled from the corner of Subaru's mouth. And, seeing this,

[Garfiel: Who th'fuck told you that, y'piece of shit? Was it Frederica runnin' her mouth about these unnecessary.....no, no way she said this. We already severed our bond as siblings when we parted ways]

[Subaru: That kind of thing's just a figure of speech, there's no way to actually sever the blood in your.....]

[Garfiel: This here, now, bringin' that up's just even more weird, ain't it. If y'wanted to use it, y'coulda found plenty o'better places to bring it up, couldn't ya?]

Hearing Subaru's winded response, Garfiel worked his disgustingly sharp intuition. The way he said it was as though while Subaru wasn't paying attention, he had picked up on facts that even Subaru failed to notice.

Although Garfiel's guess wasn't far from the truth— in fact, it was almost spot on— the thought process he used to get there was far too direct.

It was as though he possessed some extraordinary perceptiveness, or, rather, possessed something "Impossible to Ignore".

[Subaru: No way.....you.....too?]

——The moment the possibility struck him, Subaru could not conceal the tremors in his voice.

[Garfiel: ————]

Subaru's subjectless question received only an eerie silence in return.

In terms of time, only a few seconds had passed in that silence, but to Subaru, it was equivalent to an eternity.

No reply. Why wasn't he talking. Was it because Subaru's question was too vague? If he just plainly said that he doesn't understand, or even gave him a kick, it would be better than this. The only hope Subaru could cling to was some short-circuited reaction like that. But,

[Garfiel: Me too.....y'say]

High pitched footsteps. The sound of Garfiel's soles striking upon the stone-tiled floor drew closer, and Subaru could tell that he squatted down beside him. Raising his head off the floor, he could feel Garfiel's face drawing close to his, baring its fangs,

[Garfiel: And what make y'think that, huh, oy?]

[Subaru: Stop talking in a way that just stirs up even more bad feelings. I just said something that made no sense, right? It'd be alright if you could just straight up deny it..... couldn't you?]

[Garfiel: What're y'sayin like yer about t'cry?]

Ignoring Subaru's pleading request, Garfiel replied in that same ambiguous voice. The indeterminate response only inflamed Subaru's anxiety, his inner heart already a jumbled mess.

He wanted Garfiel to deny it, say it was some lucky guess. But the pregnant replies only deepened the sense of foreboding in Subaru's heart.

Beatrice and Roswaal, both of whom he considered to be allies, were, one after the other, revealed to be owners of Gospels. For Subaru now, it would not be so strange if a third person was revealed.

[Subaru: Then.....! That means you know too, don't you.....!?]

[Garfiel: ——Ah, so that's what this's about. Wonder where y'noticed]

[Subaru: ——!?!]

His throat frozen by shock, Subaru traced the image of Garfiel within his blindfolded eyes. The intonation of his voice, the listless sigh. None of it was like the Garfiel Subaru knew. But even as he relinquished these half-revealing words, the distance between them hadn't changed,

[Garfiel: Y'look surprised, but it can't be that strange. I've been livin' in the Sanctuary forever, and we've known each other for a very long time. So the opportunities weren't just once or twice]

[Subaru: B...ut.....you... aren't you supposed to hate the Witch? So much that you'd overreact like that.....and yet...]

[Garfiel: Yeah, I do. I hate the Witch, I don't trust yer stinkin' like the Witch, and I don't got no affections for that Half-Witch Emilia-sama, either. But then again, I can't say what that thing says's wrong. At least, it defin'ly knows what I wanted to know]

[Subaru: What you wanted... to know.....]

[Garfiel: ——I got no reason t'tell ya anything. But why don't y'try askin'? Y'might not get another chance]

After Garfiel spat out these words, Subaru could sense him standing up. Then, he drew away from Subaru, apparently making his way to the exit of the prison room—— and placed his hand on the door.

Hearing the wooden door creak, [Hey!], Subaru shouted to the departing Garfiel.

[Subaru: Wait!Wh-What'll happen to me. Or I mean what's happening right now?]

[Garfiel: For tryin' to assassinate that Roswaal bastard, yer sure gettin' off light. For now, you'll just stay restrained and confined till the results come out]

Confined, that was the word that came up just yesterday. From Roswaal's own mouth, no less. The fact that his self-professed status was now passed onto Subaru for enacting violence against him was nothing short of ironic.

In front of Subaru, who did not make another sound, Garfiel snorted through his nose,

[Garfiel: You'll be gettin' meals every mornin' and evenin'. Don't try anythin' funny. I'll be lookin' after ya]

[Subaru: As if..... that's the kind of thing I'd be worried about right now! Results? You said results? What results? What are you waiting for.....?]

[Garfiel: What results, ain't that obvious?]

This time, Garfiel replied as though he had just heard a most foolish question,

[Garfiel: ——The results of Emilia-sama's Trials. After she heard what y'did, she's gotten terribly enthusiastic, almost like she's tryin' to atone for what you've done]

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——After Garfiel left the room, Subaru, alone in his prison, sank deep into the sea of thought.

He could not get the words Garfiel left behind at their parting out of his mind.

In order to clear Subaru's name, Emilia had rallied herself to challenge the Trials. Perhaps she thought that if the Sanctuary could be liberated, her achievement would be enough to absolve Subaru of his crime.

It was just like Emilia, to not doubt Subaru at all.

[Subaru: But, in that moment, I.....]

Despite being overtaken by rage, in the end, Subaru genuinely wanted to strangle Roswaal.

With his hands wrapped around that person's neck, he had used his tightening grip to seal off his airway, relentlessly building up strength as if to snap his neck, or otherwise suffocate him.

Although he could not move his hands, bound behind his back, Subaru could tell that his fingers were trembling.

Forgetting the passion of that moment, all that remained in his hands was a dark remnant of the heat that nearly took another person's life. Inside his empty stomach, a sense of nausea began to build.

Even more so, considering the target of that murderous intent was someone close to him.

[Subaru: I just... don't know anymore.....]

Who to trust, what to think, and what to do, none of it made sense anymore.

What was Beatrice's position? Why did she have a Gospel? And what were those days they spent together?

What was Roswaal thinking? Why would that guy have a completed Gospel? What did he want Subaru to remember? And what was the true meaning of his inexplicable role in all this?

How could he help Emilia pass the Trials? Or rather, was it right to push her towards the Trials in the first place? He couldn't even begin to answer that question.

What was Garfiel's intention, and did he really have a Gospel? It will be impossible to defeat Elsa without his help. Yet, with their relationship deteriorating after every Return by Death, how could he get him to the Mansion?

What should he do about Elsa's attack, should he repel or evacuate? And why was there a difference between the timings of the first and second attacks? Why did that murderer know about the escape passage no one was supposed to know about? Who was Elsa's employer? What will he have to do to defeat her? Regardless, he could never forgive her. And why was the Sanctuary created? What was the outline of the remaining Trials, and why did the Trials exist in the first place? What was the goal of Echidona, sleeping in her Tomb, and how can he meet with her again? And, at the end of the last loop, what happened to the depopulated Sanctuary?

In that final moment, what was it that killed and devoured Subaru?

[Subaru: I can't..... answer... a single one]

Round and round and round, these questions without answers endlessly circled in his head.

With his eyelids painfully bound and his vision completely sealed, deprived of information about the world around him, there was nowhere his questions could turn except inside himself.

His insides packed with nothing but mysteries and doubts, he had come to a deadlock. What tormented Subaru was not only his unanswered doubts, but also anxiety at the time that he was passing in vain, submerged in these fruitless thoughts.

Since his eyes were covered, he could not say for certain, but Subaru's feelings told him that most likely a day had already passed since the night he strangled Roswaal.

It was dark, so he was probably confined inside a hidden building in the forest. The chilliness of the room was conspicuous even considering the fact that not the slightest light could slip through.

Compared to the daytime temperatures he had experienced so far, he couldn't help but notice the drastic temperature-drop here. So perhaps, it would be more constructive to consider that it was already night after sunset. If he followed the assumption that it was night, then it was clear that at least a whole day had passed.

Ever since being summoned to this Parallel World, Natsuki Subaru had sustained a fair number of injuries both light and severe. And his body still carried memories of being healed of wounds of all the various degrees.

So, judging from experience, having half his head crushed and his skull cracked open was clearly supposed to be a fatal wound. The fact that he came out of it alive without Ferris was honestly nothing short of a miracle, which only served to show how skilled Garfiel must be.

Basically, in this world, as long as the person doesn't die, almost all injuries can be healed, depending on the abilities of the healer. But naturally, the more severe the wound, the heavier the burden it would be to heal them.

Bodily fatigue can only be restored with stamina, and in the same way, Subaru's recent wounds could not have recovered to such an extent in a matter of a few hours, or even the same night.

More than likely, a night had passed. But even more convincing was the fact that, [Subaru: I'm... hungry.....]

His empty stomach, which hadn't received anything in all that time he spent sleeping, was aching and groaning endlessly, asserting its existence.



The passage of time and the indistinct hours gradually wore at Subaru's mind.

He couldn't tell how much time had passed since then, and his restraints remained unchanged. Just like this, Subaru was left inside the prison room as time went by.

[Subaru: ————]

He tried counting the seconds to keep track of time inside the void, but after counting for an hour when he felt like he was about to go mad, he finally abandoned the idea. Besides, what difference would it make at this point, even if he knew the time? After all, [Subaru: It's... probably too late.....]

Meals had been brought to Subaru six times. If they followed the schedule of once every morning and night, it would mean that three days had already passed. Three days after Subaru woke inside the Tomb—— would make this the fifth day since arriving in the Sanctuary.

Even if he left for the Mansion this morning, he would only barely make it in time for the assumed timing of Elsa's attack. The moment he passed that point in time, he had already missed the deadline.

In fact, Subaru had made the mistake from the very first moments of this loop.

No amount of regret was enough for allowing himself to be consumed by rage and throwing himself at Roswaal. If he hadn't lost control of his emotions, he would have been able to confirm far more information from Roswaal, and, above all, his relationship with Garfiel wouldn't have worsened to the point where he'd be imprisoning him.

The consequence of abandoning himself to that boiling heat of emotion, was this current caterpillar-like state.

He hadn't done any of the things he was supposed to do, and didn't even get to see the

faces of those he wanted to protect. Instead, he was here in this unsightly form, cowering in fear of the approaching time.

That is, Subaru had already given up on this loop.

[Subaru: ——I really... fucked this up.....]

Because of that momentary lapse, he had lost the chance to prevent the tragedy that was about to befall the Mansion. Which, in turn, meant that the survival of the four girls inside the Mansion had become hopeless.

Rem, Petra, Frederica, Beatrice, Subaru was knowingly leaving them to die. After he had just screamed, denouncing Roswaal, for doing the very same thing.

[Subaru:Damnit, I. Why didn't I die?]

He just wanted to die. If the restart point hadn't changed, if he could really start over again, then Subaru would return to that night and face against his odds once more. Although he would still be stumbling blind, at a loss about where to begin, at least it would be better than this unsightly state. Surely, he could do better than this. He must do better than this.

[Subaru: Otherwise, what's the point of.....]

Was he prepared to accept this resignation, and bite down on his lips and bear witness to the end of this world?

Having judged that saving the Mansion was no longer possible, and that "Death" in this loop was inevitable, Subaru immediately committed suicide and Returned by Death——was not what happened.

It was certainly the worst possible situation, and awaiting Subaru in this life was only an empty future devoid of meaning. He should gamble on Return by Death and reverse the world, and strive towards the best possible future. But,

[Subaru: If I return without learning anything, I'll just be right back where I started]

At least, Subaru needed to find out what happened in the Sanctuary after he was gone. Just what happened on the sixth day? That alone needed to be confirmed. And it was for this reason alone that, no matter how much Subaru wanted to scream his throat hoarse and clench his teeth until they cracked, he swallowed down his regrets towards the Mansion, and resigned himself to this loop.

If now was the fifth day, something should happen tomorrow.

Over the last three days, only Garfiel and someone else tasked with taking care of Subaru visited the prison. The caretaker always stayed silent, probably following Garfiel's instructions, so Subaru couldn't tell who it was. But from the way she wiped Subaru's restrained body, and her motions as she fed Subaru by hand, he determined she was most likely a woman.

In an environment where his every move was being watched, there was no opportunity to investigate further, and so the real identity of Garfiel's assistant remained unknown.

However, this must be a place where Emilia, who had rallied herself to save Subaru, couldn't find.

Most likely, it was a secret location known only to Garfiel and his assistant, where Subaru could not hope to be discovered, and much less call for help.

In fact, if Garfiel and Roswaal had both decided to confine him here, then it would be pointless to escape anyway.

[Subaru: If Emilia could pass the Trials to save me, that'd be amazing, but.....]

If the situation was reversed, Subaru was confident he would pass the Trials for Emilia's sake. But Subaru had never imagined that Emilia would try to overcome the Trials for him. And he never thought he meant so much to her that he would be her motivating force. That was just how much Subaru undervalued himself in his mind.

But in reality, the fact that no good news came after three days probably meant that, just like the loops before this, Emilia couldn't pass the Trial no matter how many times she challenged it.

In other words, the situation at the Mansion, at the Sanctuary, with Subaru, and Emilia, had all come to an impacted deadlock. Exactly like what Garfiel had once shouted to him.

[Subaru: After all, I.....]

——Have to do something.

For Emilia, the Mansion, the Sanctuary, every single problem that came up, he must overcome with his own two hands, and with the only weapon at his disposal.

A quiet resolve. Never good at giving up, it was the only reason Subaru went on living. After thinking for a long, long time, he came to the same conclusion he had already reached so many times before. Seeing it was more than his fingers could count, Subaru nodded to his heart, and waited for time to pass.

——When something finally happened, was when he felt something shaking his body as it was drifting into sleep.

[Subaru: ——mn?]

Someone was grasping his shoulders, shaking him awake as Subaru returned from his shallow slumber into reality.

He noticed saliva drooling down the corner of his lips, and since he couldn't use his hands, he nudged over his shoulder to try to wipe it. It was a strenuous activity, but, apparently having gotten used to using his upper body, he managed to wipe it off,

[Subaru: Who.....is it?]

His voice was still hoarse from having just woken up, in addition to the recent screaming. He had promised himself not to scream like that again or his throat will break apart, and by now, he was already more or less desensitized to the pain that felt like he was going to spew blood. Although, it was nothing to be happy about.

Hearing Subaru's response, the person who woke him let out a short sigh. And,

[???: Sorry to do this in the middle of your nap... but can you move, Natsuki-san?]

[Subaru: Aauh?]

Hearing the voice belonging to someone he never imagined would be here, Subaru couldn't help but let out a stupid sound.

Perhaps mistaking Subaru's surprise for drowsiness, the person mumbled [Oh, come on] in a quiet voice and gave Subaru a light slap on the face,

[???: I'm also taking quite a risk coming here to help you, you know, so can you please liven up a bit? I'm pretty sure we'll both be sorry if things ended here]

Saying this, he cut the ropes binding Subaru's hands and feet with a blade. Regaining the long lost freedom of his limbs, Subaru reaffirmed this sensation and brusquely pulled off his blindfold,

[Subaru: Augh... hands, feet... even my eyes are hurting]

In the center of Subaru's thin, still-crooked vision, he made out the shape of a man who looked like he really didn't want to be here.

A character who was here for no discernable reason, Otto Sewen made his unexpected entry onto the stage.